

9

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE BLACK SWORD SHAMAN



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



Strike THE BLOOD

THE BLACK SWORD SHAMAN

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki
Blood Servant
Servant of the primogenitor,
unaware and undying

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer



Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

Yume Eguchi
Succubus
The young successor to the
Witch of the Night

Nagisa Akatsuki
Sister of the Primogenitor
Blooming, boisterous, naive little sister

Contents

Intro

Chapter One Blue Elysium

Chapter Two Vampire at Work

Chapter Three Lilith's Awakening

Chapter Four Another Mightiest One

Chapter Five The Sword of Judgment

Outro

Afterword

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE BLACK SWORD SHAMAN

9

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
PRESS
NEW YORK

Copyright

STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 9

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SUTORAIKU ZA BURADD0 Vol.9

©GAKUTO MIKUMO 2013

Edited by ASCII MEDIA WORKS

First published in Japan in 2013 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2018 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: May 2018

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Mikumo, Gakuto, author. | Manyako, illustrator. | Bourque, Jeremiah, translator.

Title: Strike the blood / Gakuto Mikumo, Manyako ; translation by Jeremiah Bourque.

Other titles: Sutoraiku za buraddo. English Description: New York, NY : Yen On, 2016— Identifiers: LCCN 2015041522 | ISBN 9780316345477 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345491 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345514 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345538 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345569 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345583 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316562652 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442084 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442107 (v. 9 : pbk.) Subjects: | CYAC: Vampires—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M555 Su 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015041522>

ISBNs: 978-0-31644210-7 (paperback) 978-0-316-44211-4 (ebook)

E3-20180412-JV-PC

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Intro](#)

[Chapter One: Blue Elysium](#)

[Chapter Two: Vampire at Work](#)

[Chapter Three: Lilith's Awakening](#)

[Chapter Four: Another Mightiest One](#)

[Chapter Five: The Sword of Judgment](#)

[Outro](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



INTRO

INTRO

A thick darkness spread beyond the acrylic glass window.

The deep sea at night...

The silence and the chill were enough to make breathing difficult, as the boat's titanium alloy hull pressed upon one's skin bit by bit.

The floodlights illuminated only the remains of plankton, which resembled fallen snow. The survey submarine *Isrus* continued to descend toward the ocean floor, beyond the reach of sunlight.

"What's our depth?"

The captain, dressed in a blue diving suit, spoke with a tone of annoyance. Assigned to a civilian submarine surveying company, he was a veteran boasting nearly a decade of experience beneath the waves. Normally, he had a buoyant personality with a never-ending stream of wisecracks, but this day, he was in a very bad mood. The aura he gave off could be called angry, even savage.

The young helmsman, visibly cowed by his captain's demeanor, replied in a businesslike tone, "We've exceeded four thousand meters. Twenty-five hundred meters until maximum depth."

"...Is that thing really down here?"

The captain snorted, clearly unamused.

Their company had been hired to survey the bottommost depths of the open sea east of Itogami Island, over nine thousand meters below sea level. At that point, the only submarines capable of submerging that deep could be counted on a single hand. It was, in a sense, ground that humankind was forbidden to tread.

"What's the basis for this rumor that we'll find what's left of some...biological weapon from the Age of the Gods around there? A legend with no basis in fact,

right?” the captain asked.

“Who’s to say? Maybe someone saved a merman from around these parts?”

“...A merman?”

“Ha-ha, I’m kidding. But the client is a corporation from the Demon Sanctuary this time around, so I figured it wouldn’t be that strange if someone knows somebody along those lines.”

“You have a point. Besides, I’m glad someone’s hiring us, even if it’s for a stupid survey like this,” the captain spat, following it with a deep sigh.

The *Isrus*’s job was to locate traces of a biological weapon constructed in ancient times. That totally absurd detail was the cause of the captain’s foul mood.

In the first place, the survey submarine *Isrus* was built to survey animal and plant life at the bottom of the ocean and to chart the path of their evolution. Locating a curio that may or may not exist was clearly not its intended purpose.

“I don’t think it’s anything worth spending that kind of money to look for it anyway. Rumor has it that the Nalakuvera, left behind by that Deva bunch, got smashed pretty easily by the Island Guard and all.”

“You mean the ones the Black Death Emperor Front brought to Itogami Island? Well, others say it was actually the Fourth Primogenitor who wiped those out... If that’s the case, maybe we shouldn’t put the Nalakuvera down too much... Hmm?”

The helmsman abruptly raised an eyebrow, seeming at a loss as he gazed into the search monitor.

The captain looked at him with a dubious expression. “What is it?”

“An irregularity in the terrain data... Can you tell what this is?”

The monitor the helmsman pointed his finger toward displayed a CG representation of the ocean floor. A 3-D image was reproducing terrain data obtained from past surveys, and a pixelated wire-frame image was superimposed over it, updated by data from the *Isrus*’s sonar in real time. Normally, the two sets of data would be one and the same, but there was an

odd disparity.

At the bottom of the sea, there was a faint bulge over a span of several kilometers.

“It doesn’t look like a sonar error from a thermocline. Has the ocean floor had any abnormal rises?”

“No...there’s no sign of volcanic activity in this maritime area. More than that, this shape... It looks like some kind of creature, doesn’t it...?”

“A creature?”

Seeing the face of the navigator go pale, the captain glared at him. “That’s ridiculous,” he murmured. However, even in that span of time, the sonar analysis imaged on the monitor shifted in irregular ways from moment to moment.

It certainly did resemble some kind of creature crawling along the ocean floor, like an alligator or a snake several kilometers in length—or perhaps a giant dragon.

“Like hell it is... That’s too big to be a living thing... That’d make it...a real monster, straight out of myth, wouldn’t it...?!”

The captain earnestly spoke those words for his own benefit. Suddenly, the helmsman beside him shrieked. In the next moment, the submarine was assailed by a ferocious torrent resembling the blast of an explosion.

It was a brutal push deep in the sea, with all the water pressure of four thousand meters beneath the surface—

The ragged vortex emerging from near the ocean’s floor raged about, toying with the *Isrus* like a tree leaf. The pressurized shell protecting the pilot house audibly groaned from the intense creaking.

Even without checking, the origin of the vortex was clear. It was the monster. The giant monster, submerged down to the ocean floor, had slightly moved its body. That was all it took to send an incredible shock wave rippling through the surrounding area.

“B...biological demonic energy pulse confirmed! It’s...it’s alive...!”

The helmsman desperately clung to his seat as he shouted.

It was a gargantuan, oceanic creature reaching several kilometers in length. Its very existence was absurd by any rational standard. Yet, the reality of it had arrived before their eyes, scattering overwhelming destruction and terror all about.

“Turn...! Evasive maneuvers! Raise her up!” the captain shouted at the top of his lungs.

However, with the hull of the *Isrus* battered about underwater, the crew had lost all sense of which way was up. They’d already cut the emergency ballasts, but it was unlikely to have much effect amid the raging whirlpool.

The next moment, the *Isrus* stopped, almost as if it was sandwiched by some kind of giant object.

With an unsettling vibration, the hull began to crack. The pressurized shell gave off a strange sound.

“W-we’re past the pressure limit! She’s being crushed—”

“At this depth...?! ”

The helmsman’s cry made the captain gasp. The *Isrus* still had plenty of room to spare before it reached its maximum depth; the pressurized shell was built with the safety of the crew in mind, able to comfortably withstand water pressure at a depth of ten thousand meters. And yet, some kind of immense force was crushing the *Isrus*.

“C-captain!”

“Don’t tell me...”

The floodlights illuminating the exterior of the hull cracked, plunging the surrounding area into darkness. However, something rose into the final flickers—a row of countless teeth, each resembling a boulder...

The submarine was caught in the maw of the titanic beast.

“Don’t tell me...that thing’s going to eat us...?! ” the captain murmured in shock.

The words had barely left his lips when the pressurized shell shattered. There was not even time to feel the cold seawater as his mind plunged into the depths of darkness.



'Twas the night of the new moon—

The girls continued to run through the mazelike subterranean tunnels.

One girl was very small in stature. She gave off a fairly mature impression for her age, but there was no hiding her childlike face. She was probably still in elementary school, eleven or twelve at most.

She wore only a blue two-piece swimsuit with a loose parka. She wasn't even wearing beach sandals; running barefoot must have been painful.

"Can you still run?"

The girl leading her by the hand was tall and some sixteen or seventeen years old. She had long, slender limbs and a refined face. Her long, light-brown hair was worn up in a ponytail.

Her right hand was gripping a silver-colored long sword with a thick blade. They'd run a fair distance, but she showed no sign of being out of breath; perhaps she'd had some kind of special training.

"Yes...but..."

The little girl in the swimsuit gave a fainthearted reply as she came to a stop.

A shutter made out of silver-colored metal bars obstructed their path. Overcoming the stout metal bars, built to prevent demon beasts from escaping, was beyond what the upper-body strength of two seemingly helpless girls could overcome.

But the ponytailed girl smiled pleasantly as she gazed calmly at the solid shutter.

"Don't worry. I *will* get you out of here. It's my job, after all," she said, raising the silver long sword high. Without fanfare, she swung it down at the shutter blocking their advance. Her swordsmanship was elegant—like a dance. There appeared to be no strength put into it.

That was all it took to completely sever multiple bars right before their eyes.

The gap created in the shutter was not all that large, but it was enough for them to slip through. With a sway of her ponytail, she quietly lowered her sword.

“Who...are you?” the elementary school student in the swimsuit asked with a look of surprise on her youthful face.

The girl with the ponytail was passing through the gap in the shutter when she looked back, smiling somewhat proudly.

“—Sayaka Kirasaka. A Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.”

“Shamanic War Dancer?”

“I’m from a special agency for stopping large-scale sorcerous disasters and sorcerous terrorism... Well, it might be easier to say I’m a magical girl fighting for justice.” Sayaka puffed up her chest with a smug look as she spoke in a theatrical tone.

The young girl gazed at Sayaka with a neutral expression, sighing in a way that somehow seemed indifferent. “Magical girl, she says... *Haah...*”

“Wh-what?! Was that a sigh just now?!”

“Er, more importantly, the guards have spotted us.”

She pointed that out, acting as if it took a fool of an adult to treat her like a child. Sayaka groaned, getting down in the dumps for a moment before lifting her face, her spirits apparently rebounded. She turned toward the guards and poised her long, silver sword parallel to the ground.

“I-it’s all right. Just move back a little.”

Sayaka took a single step forward as the long sword in her hands changed forms. The silver edges split front and back, turning 180 degrees as they pulled apart to form a modern recurve bow. This was the true form of the Lion King Agency’s prototype transformable suppression weapon, Der Freischütz.

Sayaka took an extendable dart out of the holster under her skirt, lengthening it into an arrow.

“Lustrous Scale!”

She drew the recurve bow’s drawstring and unleashed an arrow.

This was no normal arrow, but a whistling arrow that made a great roar. It was a special cursed arrow that implemented a high-density spell chant beyond the capacity of a human’s lungs and larynx— Against normal human opponents, that explosive level of sound itself was menace enough.

The shock wave released by the roar reverberated through the narrow tunnel, causing the ambushing guards to faint as if mowed down by a scythe. The cursed arrow sailed straight and true, punching through the door at the tunnel’s exit.

“Incredible...”

The girl in the bathing suit let out a voice of admiration at the might of the cursed arrow that had soared before her eyes. Her honest reaction made Sayaka look relieved somehow as she said:

“Well, that’s to be expected. I told you, I’m a magical girl.”

“Huh? But wasn’t that just a ritual spell? Though I do think it is quite incredible...”

“Ughhh.” The cold tone of the elementary schooler’s reply made Sayaka curl her back and groan on the spot. Then the Lion King agent’s expression suddenly snapped back to seriousness.

“Can you swim...?”

Beyond the tunnel’s exit was a narrow waterway about ten meters wide. It was a canal for tourists that stretched throughout the man-made isle. Crossing it meant getting out of the facility.

Fortunately, the canal’s current was gentle, so swimming across it was far from impossible. The danger was probably minimal compared to busting through the front gate of the facility.

“I’m an excellent swimmer. I can go without stopping for about fifty meters,” the bathing suit-clad girl replied proudly.

Sayaka nodded in visible relief. She took out a thin piece of metal. In her

palm, it changed shape into a small bird—a *shikigami*, granted the breath of false life through a ritual spell.

“I’m glad. So I’m sorry, but you go on ahead. Once you finish crossing the canal, this little one will guide you until you reach a safe place.”

“...What about you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch up soon enough.”

Sayaka returned her recurve bow to sword form and gave her a strong smile. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she took a photo out of her breast pocket. The photo looked like it’d had a rough time, like its owner had once ripped it apart, only to carefully piece it back together again with cellophane tape.

“...But if you can’t link back up with me, go meet this man.”

“Mr....Kojou Akatsuki?”

The elementary schooler accepted the photo from Sayaka, dubiously tilting her head. The photo showed a teenage boy in a high school uniform. The back side had a fairly detailed profile, information purportedly required for assassination.

“Yeah. He’s an idiot, indecent, the type of pervert to put his hands on all kinds of girls at the drop of a hat—did I mention he’s an idiot?—but, w-well, you could say he does have number of good points...”

“—Is he your lover?” The girl’s voice was somber in response to Sayaka’s apologetic explanation.

That instant, Sayaka’s face turned beet-red as she forcefully shook her head. “L—?! Lov...?! N-no, it’s not like that yet...!”

“...Yet?”

“It...it’s not like that, he’s just an extra—rather, it’s the cute-like-an-angel girl that’s watching him who’ll probably be a big help to you, so—!”

“Is that so...? Er, this may be none of my business, but I think you should try being honest about your own feelings once in a while...”

“I said it’s not like that! A-anyway, hurry on now!”

Sayaka, heavily flustered by the elementary schooler’s coolheaded advice, pushed her toward the canal. The girl in the swimsuit sighed without a word. After checking the water temperature with the tip of her toe, she seemed to harden her resolve, diving into the canal.

Apparently, the kid’s claim—that she was an expert swimmer—was no mere boast. With a steady breaststroke, she made her way to the opposite side.

“...Now, then.”

For a time, Sayaka watched from behind as the girl left. Then, she raised her sword and shifted her gaze behind her.

She heard someone’s footsteps from the canal Sayaka and the girl had traversed. It was no doubt someone trying to bring the girl back. However, she only sensed a single pursuer. The regular click of heels sounded oddly unhurried.

“A Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, lectured by an elementary schooler. A sorry sight, yes?”

At last, the pursuer, with a faint giggle, was revealed.

The figure turned out to be a young woman, probably the same age as Sayaka.

Her hair was long and black, worn in an old style. The high school uniform she wore was also black. Even in the dark, it was clear that she was beautiful, but somehow, she gave off a cold impression; she had a look in her eye like she was sneering at the world.

“That’s just her misunderstanding...! Wait, you heard that?!”

Sayaka howled with blatant hostility. The black-haired girl looked back at her and broke into laughter.

“I do not believe a trespasser has any right to complain about eavesdropping... Is that not so?”

“I don’t think a criminal has any right to talk about trespassing, yes?”

Sayaka pointed the tip of her sword at the girl as she spoke.

The girl with black hair held no weapon. Even so, her eyebrows did not even twitch as she walked toward the sword-wielding Sayaka. *Come at me anytime*, her demeanor seemed to say, taunting Sayaka.

“You have great timing. I was just thinking about asking you people what Kusuki-Elysée was doing confining a little girl like that anyway.”

Sayaka kept her sword aimed at eye height as she quietly assessed the distance.

One more step. The instant the black-haired girl started to stride forward, Sayaka’s attack would reach her—the attack of Lustrous Scale, which ripped space itself, shredding any defense—

“The Lion King Agency’s Der Freischütz...the prototype suppression weapon, infused with a pseudo-spatial-severing ritual. Certainly, it is a powerful holy weapon, but—”

The black-haired girl suddenly came to a halt, smiling elegantly. The next moment, the girl leaped off from the floor with the sound of a small tap, vanishing from sight.

“Huh?!”

It was the black-haired girl who had launched an attack first. In a split-second, she’d crept into Sayaka’s flank, launching an incredible knee strike that contrasted with her calm demeanor.

Sayaka managed to barely block the attack with both hands. Naturally, she did not use her sword. Having allowed her opponent to get so close, the superior reach of her weapon had been completely nullified.

“Type Six cannot attack from this range, can it?”

The black-haired girl whispered into Sayaka’s ear. Sayaka gritted her teeth, saying nothing in reply. She couldn’t use Lustrous Scale’s ability with an enemy nestled up against her, for the rip in space was so powerful it would injure the caster, Sayaka herself.

“Urk! In that case—!”

Sayaka slipped through her opponent's flurry of attacks and drew out several charms. They were thin metal plates for creating combat *shikigami*. However, before she could blow ritual energy into them, her opponent attacked Sayaka's left hand with a karate chop. The blow made Sayaka's wrist go numb, sending the charms fluttering as they danced in the air.

"Shamanic War Dancers are used for curses and assassinations. You are at a disadvantage in simple close combat, are you not?"

The girl was very talkative for someone launching a string of quick-hitting attacks. She gave off an air of someone testing a friendly opponent in mock combat, prompting for answers, rather than simply having fun. Sayaka felt like her combat abilities were being assessed.

"—That's not set in stone! Distort!"

Sayaka parried the girl's blows as she drew in ritual energy and released it. All at once, the charms danced away from Sayaka's hand and changed into birds of prey. They were metal raptors with talons and beaks as sharp as knives.

"Activating at a distance via a compressed chant... I see, to be expected...!"

Under assault from the *shikigami*, the black-haired girl leaped backward. Naturally, even she couldn't get close to Sayaka while facing six *shikigami* simultaneously.

In that opening, Sayaka returned Lustrous Scale to its recurve bow form.

She hated to admit it, but her opponent had the edge in melee combat. While the *shikigami* kept the black-haired girl busy, she'd use the shock wave of a cursed arrow to put her out of action.

Even if she put up a magical defense, it'd take a Natsuki Minamiya-class witch or a vampire primogenitor to withstand a direct hit from Lustrous Scale. Surely, the black-haired girl, lacking a weapon in her hands, could not fend off Sayaka's attack.

This ends now—, thought Sayaka, drawing the bow.

The next moment, the black-haired girl's entire body released an ear-splitting cry.

“—Flaming Thunder!”

The *shikigami* attacking the girl were blown back like they’d been slammed with an invisible hammer. She’d used high-density ritual energy much like a bullet, shooting down the *shikigami* all at once.

“Wha...?!”

Sayaka instantly released her cursed arrow, but the black-haired girl had already whirled around Sayaka’s rear. Having lost its target, the cursed arrow exploded, collapsing the tunnel’s walls.

The Shamanic War Dancer’s expression twisted in unease. The cursed arrow’s explosion was not the reason for her disquiet, though; it was the combat technique the black-haired girl had used to shoot the *shikigami* out of the air. Sayaka knew the true nature of that technique, hence her confusion.

There was no mistaking that the black-haired girl had used the Eight Thundergods’ School—transforming amplified ritual energy into physical attack power. It was a ritual-style martial art for anti-demonic combat, developed to enable one to quell a demon with one’s bare hands. It was an extremely specialized ritual martial art.

As far as Sayaka knew, only a precious few people were able to employ those techniques: Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency. The Eight Thundergods’ School techniques were Sword Shaman techniques through and through.

“That technique... Don’t tell me, it’s the same as Yukina’s...?!”

Sayaka returned Lustrous Scale to its sword form and drove it horizontally toward her back. However, the black-haired girl was faster. With her back still turned, she pushed her body weight onto Sayaka. Normally, no attack existed that could strike an opponent with both bodies pressed together like that. But

—

“—Clapping Thunder!”

The explosive impact unleashed at point-blank range sent Sayaka’s tall physique flying.

The black-haired girl had transformed ritual energy into physical attack power

to ram her at point-blank range. Sayaka, her internal organs heavily shaken, was unable to even scream as she tumbled across the ground.

“...Why can...you use...Sword Shaman techniques...?!”

Sayaka wrung her voice out in spite of labored breaths.

The black-haired girl gave no reply, silently looking down at Sayaka, who was on her hands and knees. In the attacker’s hand was a silver long sword—Lustrous Scale.

No one except Sayaka could employ its pseudo-spatial severing, but in this circumstance, such a thing was hardly necessary. The girl could slay Sayaka with a simple downward swing of the sword.

“Are you a...Sword Shaman, too?” Sayaka asked in a broken voice.

No, the girl’s body language said with a shake of her head.

“I am the Sword Shaman’s shadow—a Priestess of the Six Blades,” she corrected in a casual manner.

Before Sayaka could hear those words, her consciousness had faded away in the darkness.

CHAPTER ONE
BLUE ELYSIUM

CHAPTER ONE

BLUE ELYSIUM

1

The water-drenched concrete reflected the sun's rays, giving off a slippery glimmer.

It was afternoon at the Saikai Academy campus, with the light of the sun shining on the drained outdoor pool. Standing at the bottom was Kojou Akatsuki, dressed in a gym uniform, deck brush in one hand.

Gazing at the sky, so bright it hurt his eyes, Kojou sighed deeply.

"...Man, it's hot."

He unintentionally let out the murmur, but the air, wavering like a mirage, was making him melt.

It was right on the eve of summer vacation. The pool was regularly cleaned once every six months. Its sides were slick with grime, tiles baking. The ceaseless ultraviolet rays pouring down on Kojou steadily robbed him of his endurance.

"Certainly, the temperature is higher than the yearly average. There seems to be a warm winter this year."

Yukina Himeragi replied with a dead-serious tone, standing poolside.

The transfer student was wearing a girl's middle school uniform. Her true identity was one of the Lion King Agency's Sword Shaman—an Attack Mage working for a special government agency dispatched to monitor Kojou.

Yukina currently lacked the guitar case with the spear inside that she always carried. Rather, she was using a blue rubber hose to spray water on the sides of the pool. Surrounded by water spray, she was a refreshing sight, the polar

opposite of the sweat-drenched Kojou.

Staring with envy as a rainbow danced around Yukina, Kojou shook his head with a hollow expression.

“I don’t think the temperature topping thirty degrees Celsius is something you can pass off as just a warm winter... Hey, wait, is this really winter? If this is actually summer, there’s not gonna be a winter break, so I don’t *have* to clean the pool, do I?”

“...Now that you mention it, it is a normal winter on the mainland. We are past the middle of December, after all.”

Yukina conscientiously rejected Kojou’s reality-evading delusions.

Itogami Island was a man-made isle constructed on open water more than three hundred kilometers south of Tokyo. It was the Demon Sanctuary of eternal summer, floating smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

“Itogami Island is hot simply because its latitude exposes it to a lot of sun, not to mention the influence of ocean currents and trade winds. The weather is particularly nice today, isn’t it?”

“If the weather’s that great, why do I have to clean this pool all by myself?”

The deck brush went limp in Kojou’s hand as he posed the question to no one in particular. Yukina’s big eyes blinked as she gazed back at Kojou.

“In place of supplemental lessons, isn’t it? You are short on attendance days due to repeated late arrivals and early departures.”

“It’s not like I was skipping because I just felt like it... I mean, I only narrowly escaped death a few times, got cast away on an uninhabited island, and got locked in another dimension, you know, little things...,” Kojou grumbled, airing a string of excuses.

In fact, ever since a ridiculous physical condition was shoved upon him—being the World’s Mightiest Vampire—most of Kojou’s unauthorized absences had come from being wrapped up in demon-instigated incidents. In other words, unavoidable circumstances. Perhaps it was because his homeroom teacher, Natsuki Minamiya, was well aware of those circumstances that she was

permitting him to get around his inadequate attendance with no worse than pool-cleaning duty.

“That said, making me clean under a blazing sun all by myself... What is this, bully-the-vampire day...?”

Kojou wiped the sweat off his brow as he surveyed the water-drained pool. When full, it was twenty-five meters deep, and it felt like a frightening size for someone to clean single-handedly.

Watching Kojou, languid and completely lacking in drive, Yukina seemed exasperated. She exhaled slightly.

“Do not be like that. I’m helping, too, so let’s finish this as soon as possible.”

“R-right... Sorry, Himeragi.”

“You are very welcome.”

Yukina stripped off her indoor shoes, going barefoot as she climbed down into the pool, hose in hand. Left with no choice, Kojou re-gripped the mop and began systematically eliminating every speck of impurity in the pool.

Yukina gazed at the little puddle of water at her feet and shrugged her adorable shoulders.

“But it really is hot today. It’s a bit of a shame to come to a pool and not be able to go for a swim.”

For a moment, the sight of her stole Kojou’s eyes.

“Come to think of it, you seem to be kind of an expert swimmer, Himeragi.”

“You think so? Back at High God Forest, we had training in underwater combat, so I aspire to swim to some degree.”

“...Underwater combat?”

That’s different from the swimming I know on a pretty basic level, thought Kojou, bewildered. As it was, High God Forest was the name of the institution Yukina had lived at in the past. On the surface, it was a girls’ school from elementary to high school in the Kansai region, but it was apparently a Lion King Agency facility for training Attack Mages.

“How about you, senpai? Do you swim?”

“Er, no, I...well, I’m a vampire, see. Water kind of clashes with me a bit, and stuff...”

The question made Kojou unintentionally struggle with his words. Seeing Kojou avert his eyes with awkward mannerisms, Yukina seemed slightly mystified as she stared.

“I thought it was superstition that vampires are unable to cross running water...”

“Er, is that so?”

“Yes. Certainly, it restricts some special abilities such as turning into mist, and some Beast Vassal affinities may make it impossible to summon them in that state, but there should not be any great physical difference between them and normal human beings.”

“Uh, but demons have individual differences, right?”

Yukina quietly gazed at Kojou with half-lidded eyes as he earnestly clamored for any handhold.

“Ah... Senpai, is it possible that...?”

“N-no, it’s not like I can’t swim! It’s just not really my thing, that’s all!”

“If you’d like, I could teach you how to swim on another occasion? After all, the World’s Mightiest Vampire being unable to swim presents something of an image problem.”

“I never said I couldn’t swim—!”

Kojou desperately continued his rebuttal in the face of Yukina’s apparently considerate proposal. Yukina giggled a little at the sight of Kojou seemingly backed up against the wall. No doubt, Kojou’s futile efforts to cover up his inability to swim were more amusing to her than the fact itself.

“Understood. Let us leave it at that.”

“G...gnn...”

Kojou’s lips twisted as he groaned. After Yukina leaned forward for a while,

shoulders shaking, she raised her head as if she'd suddenly remembered something.

"Come to think of it," she began, her tone abruptly changing, "I've seen a lot of advertisements around the pool lately. They said a private artificial island has been finished?"

"Yeah, Blue Ely? There was a special about it on a talk show yesterday," Kojou replied quickly, grateful that Yukina had changed the subject.

Blue Ely, short for Blue Elysium, was a new type of subfloat constructed off Itogami Island's coast. It was a small isle, not even reaching a radius of six hundred meters, but what merited special mention was that the entire subfloat was designed as a giant theme park. Attractions included resort hotels, leisure pools, roller coasters, and a special aquarium called Demon Beast Park that hoped to play the role of Itogami Island's new symbol.

"Right, they said they're having a trial opening before the grand opening. Itogami Island hasn't had a lot of leisure facilities like that yet, so it'll probably be a hot topic for a while. Plus, it's packed full of attractions, and the aquarium's pretty decked out. I kinda wanna go, but it's stupidly expensive...the entry fee I mean."

"You're pretty well informed about it, senpai."

Yukina gave him a dubious look. She probably found it surprising that Kojou would harbor an interest in a tourist attraction.

"Um, well, actually," Kojou said, shrugging his shoulders, "Kirasaka was asking me about it over the phone lately, so I looked up a few things."

"...Sayaka was asking you about an Itogami Island leisure facility?"

Yukina's tone sounded even more suspicious than before. Her guarded demeanor seemed to say *That's almost like she's asking you out on a date*. However, Yukina's misgivings flew right over Kojou's head.

"Seemed like she wanted to know public opinion about it, but she never told me why. Maybe she just likes pools?"

"No. If anything, she dislikes swimming, I believe. She said she hates wearing

a swimsuit because it makes her stand out too much. Also, Lustrous Scale's abilities cannot be employed underwater."

"Heh, is that so.....? Well, in her case, there'd be a lot of water resistance, too..."

Kojou seemed oddly agreeable as he pictured Sayaka Kirasaka in a swimsuit. If Sayaka, blessed with a tall figure and stunning looks, wore a swimsuit, she would doubtlessly bewitch the eyes of many. The fact she had splendidly huge breasts disproportionate to her slender physique made that all the more so. But...

"Water resistance?" Yukina's brows abruptly furled as she overheard Kojou let out the awkward comment.

Of course, Yukina was well aware of Sayaka's figure. Naturally, she also understood the physical principles giving rise to the "water resistance" Kojou had mentioned.

Beyond that, her gaze fell to her own, far more reserved, uniform-covered chest.

"...Senpai. Earlier, you said I seem to be an expert swimmer?"

"Ah? Er...no! I didn't mean it that way at all!"

Naturally, Kojou hadn't meant anything bad by it, but he couldn't overturn the cold, hard truth: Compared to the overwhelming mass of Sayaka's chest, the water would resist Yukina's very little. There was no reason for Yukina, younger in age, to harbor an inferiority complex, but that didn't mean she found it amusing to be compared in that way.

"Then how *did* you mean it...?"

Glaring at Kojou with frosty eyes, Yukina trained the tip of the rubber hose toward him. Kojou, his face bathed in pressurized tap water, couldn't stop coughing.

"*Bwah!* W-wait, Himeragi. The water pressure in that hose is pretty rough so...*gbaghb!*"

"I believe it is an excellent way for a vampire speaking such rude things to

cool off!”

Yukina’s cheeks were somewhat puffed up as she shot the line in a sulky tone.

The water in Kojou’s nose made him cough fiercely. *Why’d it have to turn out like this?* he internally lamented.

2

I am not upset, insisted Yukina, but her sullen mood persisted for some time after she’d soaked Kojou to the bone. Foul mood notwithstanding, Yukina helped him clean the pool to the bitter end, which was one good thing about her.

Thanks to that, they somehow managed to wrap up before the end of the school day, at which point Kojou headed home.

Naturally, she was right there at his side. In the first place, Yukina, Kojou’s observer, lived in the apartment next door to the Akatsuki residence. Also, of late, Yukina had been regularly joining Kojou and his little sister, Nagisa Akatsuki, at their residence for supper. Nagisa was no doubt home preparing food and awaiting their arrival.

Dragging along his body, weary from his labors, Kojou arrived at his own apartment with Yukina.

The evil rays of the setting sun had abated, but there was no sign that the stifling heat would lessen. The room ahead held the promise of a refreshing, air-conditioned atmosphere; that alone held up Kojou’s spirits as he walked onward. But...

“Huh...?!”

The instant he opened the front door, the air flowing out was just as stiflingly hot as outside. If anything, the kitchen and home appliances made it even hotter than outdoors.

“What’s with this heat...?”

Kojou’s voice quivered, this being a far cry from the pleasant, cool air he had

expected. And hearing Kojou's voice, Nagisa, who'd been in the kitchen, popped her head out into the hallway.

"Welcome home, Kojou! Welcome to you, too, Yukina! You're pretty late. Supper's already finished."

"Er... Nagisa?"

With an audible patter of her slippers, Nagisa came out into the hallway to greet her brother and Yukina. Kojou, gazing at her appearance, dropped the schoolbag in his hand in a daze. When he belatedly looked next to him, he saw that Yukina's eyes were as wide open in shock as his.

The only thing Nagisa had on was a white apron with the single image of a duck sewn on. It looked like she wasn't wearing a single stitch of clothing other than that. Her slender shoulders and pale thighs were fully exposed.

"Wh...what do you think you're doing?! What kind of outfit is *that*?!"

"What do you mean...? It's just a swimsuit apron. See?"

Speaking those words, Nagisa lifted up the hem of the apron. A white swimsuit with a nominal amount of frills flashed into Kojou's field of vision. Certainly, it meant she wasn't buck naked, but—

"You don't need to show me! I'm asking why you're going around dressed like that!"

"Well, I mean, it's still hot from the setting sun."

"What about air conditioning?! Why isn't it on when it's so freaking hot like this?!"

Kojou pointed to the living room as he wailed. The poorly ventilated room had already long exceeded human body temperature, hot enough that it was dangerous to spend time in it without any cooling.



Nagisa's lips made a sullen pout.

"Well, the power's off. Didn't you see the leaflet downstairs? It says they're changing the building's transformer. The elevators and auto-locks seem to run on a different circuit than domestic stuff, though."

"Th-the power's out...?!"

Kojou was rocked by the unexpected news. Now it made sense; the power was off, so of course the air conditioning was out. The gloom inside the apartment was apparently due to not being able to turn on the lights.

"Changing a transformer... Why do that at a time like this?"

"Some kind of breakdown. There was some really bad lightning in the northern district a little while back, right? Our apartment building's an older design, so apparently that did a fair bit of damage."

"Er..."

Unwittingly, Kojou met Yukina's face with a conflicted expression on his own. He realized that the "really bad lightning" in the northern district was from the Beast Vassal the Third Primogenitor had employed against Kojou. In other words, Kojou was directly connected to the cause of the power outage.

Yukina, realizing the depth of the situation, shifted her gaze to her own apartment.

"A power outage... Then, my room's air conditioner is also...?"

If all power inside the apartments was off, it wasn't just the Akatsuki residence that couldn't use air conditioning. That meant Yukina retreating to her own room would solve nothing.

"I'm pretty sure it's out, too. They said they'd be finished at about ten PM-ish... Since you're here, why don't you change, too, Yukina? I'll lend you a swimsuit."

"Th-that's all right... Wearing a swimsuit here would be a little..."

Yukina dug in her heels and shook her head at Nagisa's invitation, made with an innocent smile. She could accept that a swimsuit apron was a logical way to deal with the heat, but embarrassment apparently won out in the end.

In spite of that, Nagisa pressed her case further.

“But that uniform has to be really hot, right? And it’d make Kojou happy, right?”

“It would *not*. You go change, too. You have more decent clothing than that, don’t you?”

Kojou, in danger of being pegged a swimsuit fetishist, flicked Nagisa’s forehead with a finger. “Ouchie,” said Nagisa, reddening as she covered her forehead and glared at Kojou with tearful eyes.

“What? ...I thought since we didn’t go swimming this year, I’d at least wear the swimsuit I bought. Kojou, you big liar, you said you’d take me to the beach when I got better!”

“That doesn’t mean you’ve gotta wander around the house in it! I’ll take you to the beach sometime soon, so...!”

“Sheesh... You don’t need to blush *that* much. All the middle schoolers are wearing stuff like this these days.”

After saying that, Nagisa twirled around on the spot. From Nagisa’s point of view, she no doubt hoped to fluster Kojou and make him completely lose his wits, but—

“I’m not blushing. Why do I have to blush at seeing a middle schooler in a swimsuit?”

Kojou said it in a tone that screamed *Whatever* from the bottom of his heart. This was Nagisa, with a figure young even for her age, wearing a frilled bikini with minimal sex appeal, nothing that would make Kojou blush.

Nagisa seemed a little crestfallen at Kojou’s unexpected reply.

“Tch... Oh, fine already. Anyway, come have supper with us, Yukina!”

“I told you, get changed first! Geez...”

Kojou sighed as he watched Nagisa head back to the kitchen, still in her swimsuit apron. The very next moment, he felt a dark, repressed aura behind him, making him look over his shoulder.

For some reason, Yukina, still standing at the front door, had an evil glint in her eyes as she continued half murmuring something to herself:

“...So it won’t please you..... A middle schooler in a swimsuit isn’t.....good enough for you?”

“Uhhh, Himeragi? Something wrong?”

“No, nothing at all. I am not upset.”

Yukina replied to Kojou’s timid question in a businesslike voice that made his body forget the heat.

“O-okay..... Well, that’s good.”

“Yes.”

She certainly looked upset, but Kojou, instinctively sensing that it was dangerous to pursue further, pretended not to notice. He left the corridor, which was dimly lit from the power outage, and headed for the still sweltering living room.

Just as Nagisa had said, supper was already prepared for them. Sitting atop the dining table were a candle for emergencies to provide illumination and a large quantity of meals served on plates.

“This is a pretty elaborate supper... Er, isn’t this kinda too much?”

“I figured I’d use everything in the fridge before it melts or goes bad. There was plenty of meat, fish, and veggies, right? Plus, the curry and hamburg steak I cooked last week and the *onigiri* for late-night snacks.”

Nagisa replied rapid-fire to the befuddled Kojou’s question.

“...So you put them all together in this weird way... For that matter, it feels like the main course alone is enough for three nights’ worth.”

“There’s no guarantee we can hold onto it, so eat everything you can, ‘kay? Also, sorry, I ate all of your precious ice cream, Kojou. I couldn’t help myself. It was delicious, too.”

“*Nuagh*... I can’t even eat ice cream in this crappy heat...?!”

Sustaining heavy damage to his psyche from the sudden blow, Kojou washed

his hands and took a seat. Before his eyes sat such a large quantity of food; he really didn't know where to start. As Yukina sat beside Kojou, an expression came over her that made her seem equally at a loss.

The very next moment, they heard a torrent of knocks coming from the Akatsuki residence's front door. The sudden sound, echoing amid the darkness, made the faces of everyone present go stiff.

"What...? Someone at the door?"

Kojou, realizing the truth behind the loud knocks, exhaled in relief. Apparently, it was merely someone visiting Kojou and Nagisa's place banging on the door.

"Ah, right... The intercom isn't working, either. Hello? Who is it?"

Nagisa, too, seemed relieved, released from her stiffness as she called out and headed toward the front door. Then:

"Nagisa, wait! You're gonna head out looking like *that*?!"

"Aah?! R-right... Kojou, please!"

Nagisa stopped moving again when she realized she was still wearing the swimsuit apron outfit. Pushing his little sister toward her own room, Kojou insisted, "Go get changed, now," and headed to the front door.

During that time, the knocking continued without pause. Kojou felt a little annoyed by the boisterous echoes.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming... Geez, you're bothering the neighbors!" Kojou shouted while forcefully opening the door.

As he did so, a very familiar face popped into view. He was a teenage boy with short, greased, combed-back hair with headphones hanging around his neck. His lips were twisted in a sarcastic smile as he laughed in visible delight.

"Heya, Kojou. What's wrong with the intercom? Power out?"

"Yaze? What are you doing here at a time like this?"

Kojou gave off a suspicious glare at the abrupt arrival of the friend he'd known since middle school.

He'd parted ways with Motoki Yaze in class just a few short hours before. On top of that, the man had blithely ignored Kojou's request for help cleaning the pool, promptly running for the hills. Kojou thought he had some guts to show his face at all, let alone going all the way to his place to do so.

However, Yaze's chummy behavior proclaimed loud and clear that he'd conveniently forgotten about all that as he strode past the front door, letting himself in.

"Yeah, sorry to impose all of a sudden, but... Er, whoa, it's hot. What gives?"

"The power's out, so no air conditioner," Kojou replied with a pained expression.

Properly speaking, he didn't owe Yaze that kind of friendly explanation, but he really didn't want the guy to think the juice had been cut because they hadn't paid their power bill. He couldn't put it past the guy to find that so funny, he would tell the whole school about it.

Yaze must have figured as much to begin with, because he nodded without any special show of surprise.

"Huh... I see. So, Kojou...don't tell me you took advantage of the heat to get Nagisa to wear a swimsuit apron or something?"

"Hey, I didn't make her do that!"

Kojou unwittingly blurted the words out as Yaze's hypothesis hit uncomfortably close to home. Even Yaze blinked for a moment as he did a double take.

"...Eh? What do you mean...? Wait, you're serious? Whoa..."

In a completely serious voice, Yaze added, "I'm outta here."

Kojou's keen annoyance made his voice grow coarse. "Oh, shut up! What'd ya come here for, anyway?!"

"Oh, right. So instead of standing around talking here, how 'bout I come in?"

"Don't ask when you've let yourself in already."

Kojou stared blankly at Yaze's back as he rudely trod into the apartment.

When they got to the living room, Nagisa had finished changing and was just coming out of her room. She was going light, wearing a T-shirt and short pants, but surely that was a big improvement over a swimsuit apron.

“Ah...? Yaze? What is it?”

“Good evening, Yaze.”

“Yo, Nagisa. Himeragi’s here, too, huh? That’s good, saves me some time.”

Yaze spoke to the two underclassmen greeting him in a jovial voice.

“Whaddaya mean, saves time?” Kojou interrogated his classmate, visibly guarded.

Judging by Yaze’s way of speaking, it seemed he had something to tell them all, but Kojou wondered what was so important that phone calls or messages would not suffice. He was twice as suspicious, considering it was something involving Nagisa and Yukina.

But Yaze looked back at the glaring Kojou and laughed, looking very proud of himself.

“Hey, Kojou. I know it’s sudden, but would you guys like to stay at a resort?”

“...A resort?”

“Yeah. That Blue Elysium thingy.”

“Whaaat?!”

Nagisa let out a shout before Kojou could even react. She rushed right before Yaze’s eyes and replied in her characteristic rapid-fire manner.

“B-Blue Elysium, you mean *that* Blue Elysium? The blue paradise? With an amusement park and a hotel and Demon Beast Park and nine types of pools—that Blue Ely?”

“Yep. *That* Blue Ely.”

Even while half-overwhelmed by Nagisa’s vigor, Yaze smiled boldly and nodded.

“The formal opening isn’t till next year, but you’ve heard they’re holding an invite-only trial opening this month, right? It’s like a rehearsal to train the staff

and drum up publicity.”

Kojou’s face subconsciously scowled as he prodded, “...And you’re saying we’re invited?”

The invitation was too good to be true, causing his distrust to run ahead of his delight. In the first place, an invite-only entry pass to Blue Elysium meant there would be very few people there, a platinum ticket worth tens of thousands of yen to a scalper.

However, Yaze narrowed his eyes and leered; if anything, he seemed amused by Kojou’s reaction.

“The entry pass is for three days and two nights’ lodging, zero fees. Pretty attractive offer, huh?”

“Sounds more fishy than attractive. There’s a catch to this, isn’t there?”

“No, no, no..... Actually, my family’s financially involved in a bunch of the facilities at Blue Ely. Anyway, there was a booking error and they’re short a few people all of a sudden. Lucky you, huh?”

“...Maybe so.”

Kojou grudgingly nodded. Even though it’d been fully booked, an error had left them with open slots. That certainly sounded like a common enough problem.

“So that’d leave the facilities underutilized and that’d cause more problems, so we can’t leave the space unfilled. That’d make for nervous investors, and that’d be a responsibility issue for the booking department.”

“So you want us to stay there instead?”

“Well, put simply, yes.”

Behind his flippant tone, Yaze spoke with a completely serious look. Finally, Kojou understood why Yaze had come all the way to visit.

Yaze’s family name was synonymous with a leading conglomerate wielding no small influence over the Demon Sanctuary’s economy. It wouldn’t exactly be surprising for them to be financially invested in the construction of Blue Elysium, a whole new subfloat. Someone in Yaze’s family had probably asked

him to fill the vacancies. Perhaps it was better for Blue Elysium's prestige to have people stay for free than to leave rooms vacant.

Around then, Nagisa, no doubt ignorant of the circumstances, forcefully raised a hand and jumped up and down.

"Yes, yes! I wanna go! I wanna, I wanna! Hey, Kojou, let's go. It's the very same Blue Ely everyone's talking about. Who knows how many tens of thousands of yen it'd cost normally?"

"...You okay with it, too, Himeragi?"

Setting aside his excited little sister, Kojou asked Yukina in a small voice. She was technically on duty, so he thought Yukina might turn down the chance to go have fun at a resort. But Yukina nodded her head without a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, I'll go anywhere you go, senpai. I am your watcher, after all."

Yaze mulled over Yukina's statement, which could be misunderstood in a wide variety of ways.

"Watcher?"

Yukina gasped, her face stiffening.

"...N-no, I'm...just very happy to see him and his sister! I am grateful!"

"I see, grateful. Gratitude is very important. Right, Kojou?"

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the invite."

Kojou blithely conveyed his gratitude in the face of his friend's display of condescension. It still smelled kind of fishy, but Yaze's free invitation to the latest, greatest resort was very attractive. Plus, Nagisa had only just complained that Kojou hadn't brought her to the beach. If they were heading to Blue Elysium instead, even she couldn't complain.

"A deal's a deal, then. Okay, I'm handing you the tickets and pamphlets. The rest is up to you."

These words spoken, Yaze tossed an envelope with tickets for three onto the table. Then, he made brief parting words and headed out of the apartment at a

rapid pace.

“Er...hey, Yaze!”

“Sorry, I’ve still got a little errand to run. Later!”

“...What’s with him?”

Kojou absentmindedly watched Yaze leave in a hurry. He had absolutely no idea what the guy might be thinking.

Nagisa gazed at the food on the table and sighed with visible regret.

“Would’ve been nice if Yaze had eaten supper here, too... Maybe I should call him back?”

The large amount of untouched cooking remaining was enough to add one more guest with a little room to spare.

“Come to mention it, I never asked him when the ticket’s for... When do we need to head over to Blue Ely?”

Kojou, realizing he’d let a crucial piece of information slip through his fingers, reached for his cell phone. He figured he’d confirm the date from Yaze, and then try to arm twist him into eating an evening meal with them for good measure.

But Yukina, checking the contents of the envelope, reported with some bewilderment, “Senpai, the date on this ticket is...Saturday of this week...”

Kojou took the ticket from her and double-checked for himself under the flickering candlelight.

“This Saturday...?”

He compared that to the calendar displayed on the screen of his cell phone.

Yukina and Nagisa both went quiet as a momentary silence descended. Now, all present understood just why Yaze had gone out of his way to impose on Kojou’s own home, and so too why he had left without a moment to spare.

The invitation date printed on the ticket to Blue Elysium was—

“Wait, that’s tomorrow!”

Kojou's shaken voice reverberated throughout the electricity-deprived, dimly lit room.

Thus began a hurried night of preparations for their morning departure to the resort.

3

Asagi Aiba turned over atop a nice, springy bed in a pleasantly cool, air-conditioned room.

She was a female high school student with an indisputably fine face and an extravagant hairstyle. Even the oddly unsophisticated T-shirt she wore in her own room seemed more feminine just from her being the one to wear it.

Her room was very girly, filled with Western clothing, fashion magazines, cosmetics, and a few choice teddy bears. Only one part, above her study desk, gave off a clearly incongruous air: an unrefined industrial-grade monitor and a super-high-speed PC cluster. For some reason, a female high school student had a cutting-edge computer in her room. It was a surreal sight, somehow.

"...Mm, so what the hell are you planning here...?"

Asagi posed the sour question into her voice-chat headset.

The other party was Motoki Yaze. Her tone was unreservedly bitter, in part because she'd known him for such a long time, since before they even entered elementary school. It would be ridiculous to hold back now.

"Whaddaya mean, 'planning'?"

Yaze replied with a question, trying to sound innocent. In a sense, it was precisely the response she'd expected.

She coldly snorted.

"You don't have to play dumb with me. This invite ticket to Blue Ely—being short on people's just a convenient excuse, isn't it? What scheme are you trying to bring us there for?"

"You're making this sound bad. This time around, I'm kinda doing something

for your sake, too. I mean, couldn't staying with Kojou at a resort be your chance, in a sense?"

That's none of your damned business, Asagi thought with a twitch of her eyebrow. She was mostly annoyed at herself for being unable to completely blow Yaze off even though he was trying to get her seriously wound up.

"Yeah, yeah. You really enjoy teasing people about stuff like that, don't you? And anyway, it's totally meaningless with Nagisa and that transfer student there with him!"

"No, no. It's better to have a few obstacles for this kind of thing."

Shut up, be quiet. Asagi jabbed at him with poisoned needles in her own mind.

"In the first place, it's totally fishy. You hate dealing with the family business, but this one time you're singing their song?"

"Had a slight change of heart. You've gotta use what you can to get what you want, right?" Yaze replied with a lighthearted voice, laughing.

The head of the Yaze family, Akishige Yaze, was a well-known big shot of the financial world. And Yaze hated his father with a passion. Knowing this, Asagi couldn't help but distrust Yaze's demeanor.

"Hmm... So this time you're using us, then?"

"No, no, no, that's making it sound bad. Call it mutual assistance."

Yaze laughed and parried Asagi's sarcasm-drenched suggestion. Asagi, judging that there was nothing to be gained by further pressing the matter, sighed with exhaustion.

"Yeah, yeah, fine already. I'm a little interested in Blue Ely myself."

"That's great. Well, on that note—"

Verifying that Yaze had cut the connection, Asagi took off her earphone-style headset. She proceeded to slowly raise her upper body, sitting cross-legged on top of the bed.

Her sudden slap of her cheeks with both hands was to restrain herself as her

lips broke into a spontaneous grin. But even that effort was insufficient to keep the fulsome leer off her face.

She'd be staying with Kojou at a resort. She hated jumping aboard Yaze's bandwagon, but it really was a great opportunity for her. A liberating destination, pools and swimsuits, thrill rides—one might call it an unprecedentedly good situation for closing the distance with that dense, sister-complex, former-jock guy who's totally ignorant of a woman's heart. Yaze had said it himself; you should use whatever's available to get what you want.

"Blue Elysium, huh... The amusement park attractions are good, but it really does come down to the pool."

Asagi leaped off her bed and connected her PC to her favorite shopping website. She was searching for the latest swimsuits. If the seller was inside Itogami City, she could get it delivered by morning if she ordered immediately. The best bet would be to get the parcel delivered to where she'd be lodging at Blue Elysium, just to be on the safe side.

"Well, these are all decent ones, but they're kind of plain. I mean, it's a pool at a resort, so I should go in with a bang... Er, er, no, this is just..."

Asagi murmured in a very serious tone as she glared at the row of swimsuit images on display. A swimsuit for a pool was like the armor you took out to the field of battle. Naturally, Asagi had very strict standards for selecting a swimsuit. It needed to be cute enough to appeal to a complete blockhead like Kojou, but had to also have enough good taste that other women wouldn't look down on her. It was quite a difficult balance.

"Keh-keh...!"

It was around then that Asagi, still brooding over the choice, heard a strange laugh in her ear. It was the synthetic voice of the avatar for the supercomputers that ran Itogami Island, the supporting AI that was Asagi's hacking partner—nicknamed Mogwai.

He looked like a teddy bear mascot on the screen, but his laughter sounded oddly human.

"You're really into this, li'l miss. How about I give you some advice on swimsuit

selection?”

“Oh, shut *up*, you pervy AI! I’m busy. Bother me and I’ll smack you with a DoS attack.”

Suitably brushing off the sarcasm-loving AI, Asagi continued her swimsuit selection. Mogwai invaded Asagi’s residential LAN on his own initiative, seemingly just to tease Asagi, and said:

“Judging from your last time on the scales in your home, this is your current weight and body fat index, dearie. And from calling up your measurement data from the Saikai Academy clinic from your physical measurements last spring, deducing your current three sizes, like so. From there, the swimsuit best fitting the li’l miss and likely to get the most attention is—”

“Gyaaaaa—! What are you doing with someone else’s private information?!”

Asagi’s scream reverberated through the residential district in the dead of night.

And thus, the curtain fell, the rest of the night before the trip left unknown.

“—Well, I think that worked out all right, don’t you?”

Having finished the voice chat, Yaze spoke those words before fishing his smartphone out of his pocket. He was standing on top of a giant shopping mall in Island West—the roof of Thetis Mall. It was a place with some of Itogami Island’s most enjoyable nighttime scenery, making it one of the city’s standard date spots. Most of the people around Yaze were oodles of young couples on dates—

That was why *the two* didn’t stand out.

“Thank you for your hard work, Motoki. I pushed a rather troublesome job onto you, didn’t I?” The figure standing beside Yaze spoke in a quiet voice.

She was wearing a plain T-shirt and a long, outdated skirt. She was a girl with looks that didn’t stand out, wearing glasses and carrying a thick book. Her tone was polite, but not stuffy. Indeed, her voice sounded teasing, almost like a laugh.

“Hey, don’t be silly. There’s no way I’d turn down a request from you.”

Yaze boldly laughed as he met her sidelong gaze, blatantly bad manners. The glasses-wearing girl made no reply. All that came from her was a wry, lonely smile, as if she was indulging a naughty younger brother.

Yaze twisted his lips, seeming dissatisfied at her reaction.

“This isn’t like you, though. Let’s set Kojou and Yukina aside. Why are you involving even Asagi and Nagisa?”

“Simple insurance, to contain the damage to a minimum should the worst occur.”

The glasses girl’s reply was blunt. Yaze raised his eyebrows in visible surprise at her unexpected answer. She acted like she could foresee everything that would happen in the future; thus, they were not words he expected to hear from her.

“Insurance, huh. In other words, there’s risks involved that even you folks can’t control?”

“We are playing every card we can... However, yes, this situation might be somewhat troublesome.”

The girl’s words bore no sense of urgency, but that made the situation come off as all the more serious. Apparently, some place unknown to Yaze was causing an environmental change enveloping the Demon Sanctuary—a change that not even someone with her position and abilities could hold in check.

“That *really* isn’t like you. That’s some pretty timid talk from someone who can go toe-to-toe with a vampire primogenitor.”

Yaze spoke in a tone that seemed half-jest, half an effort to console. But the girl smiled self-effacingly and shook her head.

“Being one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency might sound grand, but it means nothing more than being a cog of the organization. There are many things in which I cannot have my own way. In the end, I am merely a disposable commodity.”

“Hiina...you’re...”

The sudden revelation of the girl’s real feelings struck Yaze by surprise,

shaking him. But the girl silenced Yaze by raising a single finger, as if to say *you mustn't do that*.

“Motoki Yaze, I am here as Koyomi Shizuka.”

“Sorry.” Yaze glanced back at her with a shrug at her quiet rebuke. Then, a broken laugh suddenly came over him as he asked the girl calling herself Koyomi a question.

“You’re going to Blue Ely, too, aren’t you? Can I at least hope to see you in a swimsuit?”

“Underwater combat is out of my jurisdiction, same as you,” Koyomi replied in the same casual tone, her expression unchanged from before.

“Well, you’re no fun.” Yaze strained a smile at her predictable reaction.

Shortly after, Koyomi’s cheeks reddened below her glasses as she murmured with a fleeting voice, “And I detest swimsuits... I simply do not look good in one...”

“What?” Yaze dryly said, but by the time he shifted his gaze without thinking, Koyomi was nowhere to be seen. She’d vanished without a trace, almost like no one had been there to begin with.

However, the girl’s final words continued to burn in the back of Yaze’s mind, loud and clear.

“Geez... A surprise attack is sooo unfair...,” he groaned, scowling. “Not cute at all.”

It was the very first time that the girl had acted her own age in front of Yaze. There really had to be something stirring in the environs of the Demon Sanctuary.

4

Subfloat Blue Elysium had been constructed on the open sea about eighteen kilometers from Itogami Island proper. It was a small, fan-shaped island, somewhat resembling a sliced pineapple. A private ferry ran between it and

Itogami Island, with about twenty minutes required each way.

The interior of the freshly commissioned boat was beautiful, and the view from the deck was marvelous. Candy and drinks were provided free of charge. However, Kojou lacked any fortitude remaining to enjoy those amenities that day.

“A-are you all right, senpai? The color of your face has become rather...”

They were at Blue Elysium’s harbor, shortly after arrival. Kojou was squatting down on the pier as Yukina continued to rub his back with a worried look.

He was facing the ground, his face so pale it was completely bereft of all signs of blood. In one sense, it seemed somehow fitting for a vampire, but it wasn’t that he was being assailed by the urge to drink blood. The cause of Kojou’s poor physical condition was seasickness. The ferry’s shaking did a number on his inner ear; he’d just finished spewing out all the contents of his stomach. It was a pathetic sight unbecoming of the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

“I’m...I’m getting there... If I rest for a bit, I’ll recover...I think.”

In spite of himself, Kojou put up a brave front with all his might to allay Yukina’s concerns.

The silver lining was that it was still about fifteen minutes before they were due to meet up with Yaze. He’d arrived at Blue Elysium first to check in at the hotel and handle that and other annoying paperwork. So Kojou and the others were just waiting around at the harbor until he returned.

Nagisa squatted beside Kojou, peering at the side of his face as she said, “Wow, this is kind of a surprise. Kojou, I had no idea you were prone to seasickness.”

Kojou scowled in annoyance at the girl’s rapid-fire tone, even more high-tension than usual.

“I don’t think I used to be, but I had a bit of a bad run-in on a boat. Maybe that’s why.”

“...That so?”

“Yeah.”

Kojou's vague words glossed over the fact he'd been chased around and shot at by Island Guard patrol boats, something he couldn't just come out and tell her. Fortunately, Nagisa made no special effort to pursue the matter further.

"Hmm... Anyway, wanna drink something? I just went to buy drinks from the shop."

As she spoke, she opened up a bag packed with plastic bottles. It seemed she'd gone out of her way to bring them when she'd seen Kojou in poor physical shape.

Grateful for his conscientious little sister, Kojou reached toward the contents of the bag.

"Suppose so. Any carbonated drinks?"

"Yep. Which one would you like? There's German potato soda and cola that's vegetable juice flavor."

Bwah! went Kojou, unwittingly choking. The mere thought of those unpleasant tastes invading his mouth made him retch.

"I'll die if I drink something that awful in my condition! And who makes a cola that tastes like veggies, anyway?! If you're gonna have that, just have a veggie drink to begin with!!"

Kojou thought it a rather sensible objection, but Nagisa's cheeks puffed up without a single hint of reflection.

"Well, I don't mind hot new products like this. They give you a sense of adventure."

"A lot of adventures turn into just another reckless challenge, don't they?"

"Well, Kojou, if you won't drink it, Yukina will just have to become a casualty in your place. Fine with that?"

"...Huh?!"

Yukina, suddenly pulled into the conversation, froze as she stared at the ghoulish plastic bottle in Nagisa's hand. It was a soft drink, but it retained the yellow color typical of a vegetable drink with bacon-shaped strips of some kind of milk-colored ingredient floating inside it. She granted that it was novel, but it

didn't look like a drink that would be accepted by the masses by any stretch.

"Geez, even you're calling it bein' a casualty..."

Kojou made the minor jab quietly so that the people concerned would not hear it as he discreetly left the scene. Yukina remained frozen stiff from Nagisa's question, "So which one?"

Sorry, apologized Kojou in his own mind.

It was just a bit past nine AM. The amusement park and pools were yet to open, but invited guests continued to pour into Blue Elysium. It sure was the latest and greatest resort.

Kojou sat down on a nearby bench, gazing at the various people as he waited for the nausea to begin anew. That was when he suddenly felt something pleasantly cool being pressed against his neck.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed in surprise, looking over his shoulder to see Asagi, leering at him in fancy street clothes. She was pressing a white, cooling gel sheet for relieving fevers into Kojou's neck.

"Here, Kojou. Keep this on you and you'll feel a little better."

"...Oh, it's just you, Asagi? I'm in bad shape, so don't scare me like that!"

"Well, you sure got pathetic from a little seasickness."

Even though her words were sharp, she politely unfolded the sheet and applied it to the back of Kojou's neck. It conveyed a pleasant coolness to the depths of his body, easing the difficult to bear sense of nausea.

"Ohh, feels like that worked somehow."

"Neat, huh?"

Seeing Kojou's honest reaction, Asagi proudly tossed her chin. Then, she let out a little smirk as she held the pose.

"...What?" he asked.

"I mean, cooling off the Fourth Primogenitor to make his seasickness go away, isn't that just totally lame? This is why I still can't believe that whole World's Mightiest Vampire business."

Asagi continued laughing in visible delight as she applied a second sheet to Kojou's forehead. Now that she mentioned it, it was only very lately that she'd learned that Kojou had become a vampire. Normally, a thing like that would scare the stuffing out of someone, but Asagi's behavior toward him since being exposed as a vampire hadn't changed one bit. If anything, she found it a source of amusement, such as that very moment. It wasn't that Kojou was ungrateful for Asagi's reaction, but...

"I don't have this condition because I want to, geez! And just to say it, don't talk to Nagisa about this."

"Oh, right...Nagisa has that demonophobia thing, huh...? Mm-hmmm."

After nodding once with a dead-serious look, the corners of Asagi's lips rose into a leer. That expression made Kojou feel a twinge of concern.

"Wh...what's with that smug I've-got-something-on-you look?!"

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Besides, I've got plenty of secrets you can't tell Nagisa besides the vampire thing. I mean, there was that time in the phys ed storage shed in the second year of middle school..."

"Hey, cut that out! Shit, you made me remember something in my past I wanted to forget!"

Kojou unwittingly clutched his head and moaned in anguish. Apparently, Asagi gave his dark secret from middle school the same weight as being a vampire.

"Come to think of it, Yaze didn't say one word about you coming, too..."

Kojou changed the subject before Asagi needlessly dredged up other memories.

"Well, that figures, it was really late last night when Motoki invited me out of the blue. Thanks to that, I didn't have enough time to prepare, and the swimsuit I have for today isn't the one I really liked."

"Nah, something like that's no big deal..."

Kojou easily brushed off Asagi's grave-sounding murmur. Her cheek twitched.

"Excuse me?! 'Something like that'...? 'No big deal'...?"

“More importantly, what is Yaze thinking? Aren’t you suspicious?”

“...Well, that was on my mind, too. There’s gotta be some kind of catch.”

Asagi, seemingly knowing that far too well, twisted her lips as she agreed with Kojou’s statement.

In contrast to his frivolous appearance, Yaze was a good friend who paid attention to even the smallest details. The flip side of that was that he paid *too* much attention, leading to him plotting strange schemes.

One example was how, back at the ball game competition, he’d arm twisted Kojou and Asagi into a doubles pair. Doubtless he bore no ill will, but it was meddling nonetheless. Kojou and Asagi thoroughly suspected that the trip to Blue Elysium concealed a similar scheme behind the stage. And just then...

“Er...Yaze?”

“Sorry, sorry. Made you wait, huh?”

Hearing Yaze’s voice with speak-of-the-devil timing, Kojou and Asagi turned to look. There was a vehicle parked in front of the harbor where Kojou and the others had arrived. It was a small, electric-powered cart, the sort often seen on golf courses. A teenager with a Hawaiian shirt was sitting in the driver’s seat, with closed-style headphones dangling from his neck.

“Er, Yaze, you can drive?! Do you have a license?”

Nagisa rushed over in surprise and posed the question to Yaze, sitting in the driver’s seat. Yaze stopped the cart right in the middle of the road.

“Blue Ely is private property, so I don’t need a license. Besides, this thing drives itself.”

Yaze pointed to the dashboard, where there was a simplified map of the interior of Blue Elysium and a touch panel for choosing destinations with a fingertip. There happened to be a coin slot on the side of the panel. Apparently, the electric cart was rigged to move when you put a five-hundred-yen coin in it. It was an odd clash of high and low technologies.

“Now then, our next stop is the Japanese hotel district. Everyone, please get aboard the cart.”

Suddenly transforming into a tour guide, Yaze indicated to Kojou and the others with his fingers. *What's with that way of talking?* thought Kojou as he and the others all climbed aboard the cart.

Yukina stopped, realizing midway that there weren't enough seats. "Er...this vehicle seats four people?"

Including Yaze, that made a total of five occupants. However, each of the electric cart's four seats were designed for one person and came with its own armrests, so cramming more in didn't seem viable.

"Ahh, that's all right, that's all right. See, there's a seat free right there?"

He pointed to the back of the rear seats. Certainly, there was space there for carrying luggage; by rights, it was probably where you'd stick golf bags. Besides being so narrow that you could scarcely sit, it was tilted at a steep angle to make fishing golf clubs out easier.

"The cargo box...? Who the hell would sit there...?"

Kojou let out the halting murmur as he gazed at the cargo box with obvious anxiety. That instant, the gazes of everyone present fell upon Kojou as one.

"Wait, *me*?! Wait a minute, I still have aftereffects from seasickness..."

"Relax, the speed won't be enough to make you carsick. Well, let's go. Snap to it!"

"Wa... I said to wait!"

Kojou, seeming to be in imminent danger of being left behind, hastily climbed into the cargo box. That instant, the cart Kojou and the others were on suddenly jolted and accelerated.

Certainly, the speed wasn't all that fast—much slower when compared to a normal car, but...

"Dwahh, it's shaking, it's shaking, I'm gonna fall, I'm gonna fall! Stop it, Yaze! At least lower the speed!"

The cart's protruding cargo box shook all over the place from the slightest imperfections of the road's surface. It wasn't built for people to sit on to begin with; thus, its design conveyed vibrations a great deal.

“S-senpai...?!”

Noticing that Kojou was being tossed about, Yukina looked back at him in concern. However, Yaze was scratching his head in a carefree manner.

“Guess I miscalculated. Sorry, Kojou. Once this thing starts moving, it won’t stop till it reaches the next stop, so—”

“Eh?!”

It’s out of my hands, Yaze’s shrug of his shoulders seemed to say. During that time, the automated cart continued to robustly accelerate.

“Make it stoooooooooooooooooop—!”

Kojou’s bitter cry echoed through the air above the resort.

Thus did the morning of their stay at Blue Elysium begin.

5

The cart setting out from the harbor advanced along a counterclockwise path along Blue Elysium’s fan-shaped exterior.

The first thing that came into view was the part-aquarium, part-zoo dubbed Demon Beast Park. It was a group of facilities for keeping and researching demon beasts, with twenty-two hundred total from some three-hundred-odd species, including endangered species, from every corner of the globe. Many were open for visits by the general public. In particular, it boasted the largest number of aquatic demon beasts being raised in the world.

Next was Blue Elysium’s biggest selling point: its huge coastal pool area. It was large enough to host international competitions, boasted waterslides over two hundred meters long, and had an elaborate arrangement of numerous types of pools so a person could play around in a swimsuit all day long.

The amusement park stood next to the pools. Not only did it have standard attractions like a Ferris wheel and roller coasters, but it also played on the special nature of a Demon Sanctuary to have a *genuinely haunted* haunted house, and to top that, thrill rides so incredible non-demons weren’t

guaranteed to come back alive.

Then, after passing a shopping mall with restaurants and a line of stands out front, Kojou and the others reached the hotel area where their stay was planned. In the center of the giant Hotel Elysian, what many would call the symbol of Blue Elysium, rested numerous resort mansions and rentable villas placed alongside canals.

It was before one of these that the electric cart came to a halt—specifically, a white, two-story cottage.

Yaze, sitting in the driver's seat, got out of the cart and leisurely stretched. "Well, at least we all got here safe and sound."

"Does this...look safe and sound to you...?"

The reply came from Kojou, still squatting in the cargo box and speaking resentfully. It had taken about fifteen minutes to drive from the harbor to the cottage. Kojou's physical condition was extremely poor from his internal organs having been continuously shaken during that time. His stomach, already significantly weakened by seasickness, was proclaiming its poor condition with all its might.

However, Yaze casually brushed aside Kojou's anguish.

"Thanks to this, we've established that the electric carts still have room for improvement on the safety front. I'll have to send the administration a report."

"...Why you little..."

As soon as my body recovers a little, I'm giving that guy a smack, resolved Kojou.

Meanwhile, Nagisa got out of the cart with her luggage and headed into the Mediterranean-style cottage.

"Hey, Yaze. It's really okay for us to stay here for a few days?!"

"It's a real piece of work, ain't it?"

Yaze smiled proudly as Nagisa gazed at it, making a sound of wonder.

In point of fact, the interior of the brand-new cottage was far more lavish

than Nagisa had expected, causing her mouth to gape. The interior was huge; the furnishings, ample. Even the fridge was jam-packed with cold drinks.

“There should be beds to spare, so go ahead and divvy them up however you like.”

“Yaaay! Wow, the second floor’s huge, too! It’s gorgeous! There’s working air-conditioning, the kitchen’s sparkly clean, the sofa’s so soft, and there’s even a sauna in the bathroom!”

Nagisa busily ran around from room to room like an excited puppy. In contrast, Kojou, left by his lonesome outside, was frozen stiff in front of the entrance, the overly extravagant cottage overwhelming him.

“—Seriously, Motoki, what are you thinking?!” Asagi pressed.

“Eh, whaddaya mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! Just because there’s a booking error doesn’t mean you can use a place as nice as *this* for free, dammit!”

Asagi represented everyone’s viewpoint in that matter.

Far removed from the Japanese mainland, prices were higher for everything on Itogami Island. That was all the more true for tourist traps like Blue Elysium—a popular resort with an avalanche of advance bookings. Even a trial opening period preceding the official opening couldn’t justify such liberal use of operating expenses.

“Man, what a worrywart. I speak no lie—all fees are waived. Entry and lodging fees anyway.”

Asagi’s hands were still grabbing Yaze by the chest as he raised both hands in surrender. The way he danced around the details only made the look in Asagi’s eyes grow graver still.

It was at that moment that a new electric cart passed through the hotel area gate and approached.

This cart was different from the one for arriving guests that Kojou and the others had ridden. Rather, this was a simple white cart for business use.

Sitting in the driver’s seat was a young woman wearing a tight skirt. She was

in her late twenties, or thereabout. Based on her tidy makeup and hairstyle, she looked like a caterer. She gave off the air of a capable woman running her own family restaurant or fast-food franchise.

“Hi! Sorry to make you wait like that!”

The woman called out to Yaze in a tone that was lighter and more feminine than Kojou had expected.

For some reason, Yaze straightened his posture and lowered his head in a formal bow.

“Ah, chief. Thanks.”

“...Chief? Who is she?”

What’s their relationship? wondered Kojou as he looked back and forth from Yaze to the woman.

The woman got off her stopped cart and gave Kojou a look from head to toe.

“So these children are the cavalry? Yes, yes, looks are so-so, but it’ll be a big help. We’ll have just enough people to fill out the end-of-week shifts. Get set by afternoon today, please.”

“...Cavalry?”

Kojou felt bewildered, unable to keep track of the conversation’s flow. Asagi and the others were just as confounded. Yaze, the only one who understood the situation, abandoned all responsibility to explain, whistling with an innocent look.

“Hey, Yaze.”

“What does she mean, shift? Don’t tell me you plan on making us work?!”

Kojou and Asagi pressed upon Yaze from the left and right, questioning him in quiet voices. However, he did not look apologetic; indeed, the expression he displayed was a villainous smile.

“Mm? I explained, didn’t I? There was a booking error, so they’re short on people.”

“By short on people, you mean they don’t have enough *workers*?!”

Even though Kojou was indignant on the spot, a corner of his mind found that it made perfect sense. Now that he thought about it, of course that was it. Blue Elysium was a huge tourist facility that expected to receive hundreds of thousands of guests per year. A booking mistake with *guests* was insignificant and wouldn't be any skin off the organization's back. It was certainly no reason to invite Kojou and the others to stay for free.

It wasn't guests that Yaze needed, but part-time employees to work at the facility.

That said, the lack of employees had to be so sudden that they didn't have time to recruit part-timers through normal methods. Besides, a lot of the information about Blue Elysium's trial opening wasn't meant for the public to know, meaning that you couldn't bring people in to work there unless you could trust them to a certain degree. Thus, Yaze had set his eyes on Kojou and the others.

"Why didn't you mention something important like that at the start?!"

"Well, if I asked you straight-up to work for free, Kojou might have, but you sure wouldn't have, right?"

"Damn right, I wouldn't!"

"Why is it okay for me to work for free here?!"

Asagi and Kojou both objected with ferocious vigor. Having harbored concerns the whole time that Yaze was up to something, they were incensed now that the nature of his scheme had been revealed.

For her part, Yukina, seemingly left behind, looked very out of place as she stared at Yaze.

"Er...What should we do, then...?"

"Ahh, you and Nagisa can just go play around however you want. Don't worry 'bout these two." Yaze fished out a number of ID cards with a Blue Elysium logo. "This is the key to the cottage and a free pass to the attractions. You can use that to get into pretty much every place here on Blue Ely for free."

"B-but..."

“It’s all right, no need to be concerned. Either way, making middle schoolers work is against the law. Think of it as a present from Kojou, and lounge around with Nagisa, ’kay?”

Yaze pressed an ID card into a reluctant Yukina’s hands. When he put it that way, Yukina had no reason to refuse. *I’m sorry*, her conflicted face said as she put all her effort into speaking words of thanks.

“Wait...if Himeragi and Nagisa are splitting off, that means it’s only me and Kojou working?”

Asagi, listening to Yaze’s conversation with Yukina, suddenly dropped the tone of her voice as she double-checked. *But of course*, said Yaze, sending a smile rich with implication back Asagi’s way.

“I figured it could get pretty lonely, so I asked ’em to make sure you work in the same place.”

“Hey, same workplace or no workplace, we haven’t actually said that—”

—*we’d work there*, Kojou was going to say in rebuttal, but Asagi cut him off midway.

“Fine, then.”

“Eh? A-Asagi?”

“We’ve come this far, so complaining won’t get us very far. If you’re gonna insist, then I guess I’ll lend you a hand.”

“Ohh, what a sympathetic heart. I expected no less.”

Yaze clapped his hands in praise of Asagi. All Kojou could do was gaze dumbfounded in the face of her sudden change of heart.

Then, she gently narrowed her eyes and glared at Yaze.

“In exchange, you *will* be paying me for the work. You understand, don’t you? I don’t come cheap.”

“R...right... Totally get that...”

Overwhelmed by Asagi’s gaze, a cold sweat ran over Yaze as he nodded.

The lady who Yaze had called chief apparently saw that as settling the matter.

With Kojou standing stiff, she called him over, taking baggage out of the cart and pushing it onto him.

“Here are your staff T-shirts. You can wear swimsuits underneath. There’s no time, so change right away, okay?”

Kojou, still unrecovered from all the confusion, stared in the silence at the pair of T-shirts he’d been handed.

The sky above Blue Elysium was very clear; the strong sun rays caused thick shadows to fall.

“...Seriously? Geez.”

Kojou’s frail murmur vanished, carried away by a humid coastal breeze.

CHAPTER TWO
VAMPIRE AT WORK

CHAPTER TWO

VAMPIRE AT WORK

1

Countless demon beasts were swimming around in a giant water tank several times the area of an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

Sleeping near the bottom of the water were monstrous fish from southern Asia known as makara. They had frog-like bodies and wings like a flying fish, probably making them water leapers. Besides those, there were little-known demon beasts resembling octopi and eels frolicking inside the water tank in numbers too great to count.

This was the giant water tank in Demon Beast Park—Blue Elysium’s most famous sightseeing destination.

“Wowww...”

Nagisa Akatsuki’s eyes glittered as she leaned her petite figure over the walkway’s railing. Her long hair, bound up to look like a short bob, swayed to and fro in a regular rhythm.

“It really is huge. That’s the biggest demon beast aquarium in the world for you... Er, is that a horse? A horse merman?”

This stated, Nagisa pointed to a mysterious creature with the upper body of a horse and the lower body of a fish. It had a silver fin instead of a mane; wet from the water, it glimmered and sparkled. It was a beautiful demon beast that looked positively divine.

“That’s a hippocampus, a type of seahorse native to the coasts of the North Sea Empire. It’s the first time I’ve seen one in the flesh, though.”

Right next to Nagisa, Yukina explained. As a Sword Shaman of the Lion King

Agency, Yukina was well versed in a wide variety of demon beasts, but naturally, even she hadn't had a chance to see rare marine demon beasts on the verge of extinction up close like that. Though she retained her cool head, she couldn't conceal her excitement for the extraordinary experience.

"Those eyes are so cute, huh... I wanna try feeding it, too...", Nagisa murmured in a wistful tone.

At the edge of the water tank, demon beast trainers in wet suits were feeding the hippocampus. They were teaching them tricks for when the attraction would open for real in the coming year.

Rumor had it that Demon Beast Park had been constructed with the aim of using the entry fees for visitors to defray the enormous costs of keeping the demon beasts for research. Apparently, the world's first Hippocampus Show was expected to be their shining jewel for attracting guests, which would account for the zeal in the trainers' instructing.

Like vampires and beast men, demon beasts had sufficient intelligence to come to a mutual understanding with human beings, but unlike demons with rights guaranteed by the Holy Ground Treaty, their protections lagged behind. In the wider world, many demon beasts were still thought of as dangerous monsters, with overhunting and incidents of slaughter never really ending.

Also, the reality of it was that many demon beasts possessed high combat capabilities, and the species that would attack people were far from few. If facilities such as Demon Beast Park spread, and research into their ecology advanced further, perhaps humankind might be able to peacefully coexist with them, but a path to equality seemed unthinkable.

As Yukina indulged in such sentiments, Nagisa, right beside her, let out joyful cries as the hippocampus juggled beach balls like street performers juggling beanbags. Yukina looked on in silence.

"—Yukina? Something wrong?"

Nagisa, noticing Yukina's seemingly dubious gaze, *hmm'd* and cocked her head as she asked. Yukina smiled and shook her head.

"Nah, I was just wondering...you're not scared of the hippocampus?"

“Aw, geez...! Kojou, right? None of his business to go telling you that!”

Nagisa raised both hands high as if to put her anger on display, exhaling hard.

“...None of his business?”

“About my demonophobia. You probably heard I got hospitalized because of an incident, right?”

“Yeah.” Yukina nodded meekly.

Nagisa Akatsuki had been gravely injured in a terror incident involving demons; ever since, she’d had an extreme fear of contact with demons. Actually, it had been Asagi who’d told her about it rather than Kojou, but that didn’t matter.

Several times over, Yukina had herself witnessed the sight of Nagisa going into a panic when encountering demons. It was rather surprising that Nagisa had believed her demonophobia had remained a secret for all that time.

“I don’t mean to discriminate, but I am still a little scared. Of vampires and beast men and stuff,” Nagisa confessed in a crestfallen, forlorn tone. However, looking back at Yukina’s worried face, she immediately broke into a cheerful smile.

“But I’m fine with demon beasts. Fear of men doesn’t make you scared of male puppies, right? I like animals. I even like reptiles. But I’m not good with bugs. So if there’s any sea spiders or stuff, I think I’ll pass.”

“Bugs...?”

Yukina began to brood over whether she should point out that spiders are not actually insects. Nagisa peered straight at Yukina’s face with deep interest.

“Hey, hey, do you actually have Kojou and Asagi on your mind?”

“Well...a little. I feel bad for her and senpai for it to be just us having fun like this.” A thin, pained smile came over Yukina.

About an hour prior, Kojou and Asagi had run off to part-time work wearing Blue Elysium shirts. With Yaze running off, claiming he had to help with the family business, Yukina and Nagisa, left behind, had no option but to visit Demon Beast Park all by themselves.

And while that was all in good fun, Yukina did feel fairly guilty about it, particularly from her standpoint as Kojou's observer.

"Oh, you mean that...?"

But Nagisa seemed deflated as she listlessly hung her head. Apparently, Yukina's reaction hadn't been quite the one she was looking for.

"Ah?"

"Well, I mean, there's nothing we can do to help with the work. Like Yaze said and all, we're still in middle school... And anyway, that's not even what I mean. I mean, you know, Asagi."

"What about Aiba?"

Yukina's eyes blinked as she inquired. Nagisa's expression became grave, apparently on purpose.

"In other words, um, Yukina, what do you think of Asagi, anyway?"

"Umm... She's a very good-looking person, she's very brave, and she's kind."

Those were Yukina's honest feelings. After all, Asagi had saved Yukina's life twice over. The first time was when they'd been kidnapped by the Black Death Emperor Front. The second time was during Yukina's battle with Meiga Itogami.

Under circumstances that would leave a normal person paralyzed with fear, Asagi had devised a program to destroy the Nalakuvera the first time, hacking a facility's security pods to save Yukina the second. A Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency had been saved by a high school girl with no combat training whatsoever. After that, Yukina paid Asagi respect and caution in equal measure.

And then...

"Yukina, I love you!"

"...Eh?!"

Yukina was left bewildered by Nagisa's sudden hug, having no idea what was going on. Nagisa seemed very excited, somehow, as she strongly squeezed Yukina with both arms.

"Yukina, you're incredible. I figured you would feel that way. You get it. Yeah,

Asagi's smart, kind, and really cool. I tell everyone, but they don't really get it."

"...They don't really get it?"

"That's right. No one praises Asagi for anything besides her looks. Especially the boys in our class! Like, 'She seems so erotic,' 'I want her to teach me this move or that move,' 'She looks like she dates for money'... Ugh, boys!"

Nagisa seemed to grow more annoyed the more she remembered, almost as if she was angry on her own behalf. Yukina was beside herself, gazing at Nagisa for a while, but...

"You really like Aiba, don't you?"

The pleasant smile accompanying Yukina's statement made Nagisa seem to blush as she nodded a little.

To Nagisa, having been hospitalized for long periods since arriving on Itogami Island, Asagi was a precious friend near to her in age, one of the very few people in the outside world she was truly connected to. If anything, even without that, it was natural for Nagisa to look up to someone with both brains and beauty like Asagi.

"It'd sure be nice to have Asagi as my real older sister, huh... If you put aside it being a waste for her to pair up with Kojou," Nagisa murmured in a tone that sounded too serious to dismiss as a joke.

Yukina nearly went "I suppose so" but thought better of saying such a rude thing about her friend's older brother.

"Er...um, that's...", the Sword Shaman stuttered.

"But that goes the same for you!"

"...It does?"

Yukina's thoughts froze for a moment as the conversation suddenly pointed toward her.

"Well, I definitely like Asagi, but my position is neutral, soooo I'm cheering you on, too, Yukina! That's why I wanted to ask about your honest feelings and stuff. But maybe it's better not to ask. Wow, now I'm worried..."

“Er, I think you are misunderstanding a few things here. You see, I—” Offering a meandering excuse, Yukina began to protest Nagisa, who was clutching her head in anguish. She couldn’t exactly tell her *No, I’m only observing your older brother.*

But Nagisa paid no heed to Yukina’s inner conflict.

“Although, I’m a little reluctant to call you Big Sis, Yukina... You’re a bit flaky...”

“F-flaky...?”

Yukina was somewhat struck by her friend’s unexpectedly poor assessment. She never expected that Nagisa, of all people, would see her that way. It was a shock to Yukina, who meant to be an ever-reliable person.

I really need to refute that, thought Yukina, hastening to open her mouth. The next moment—

A violent tremor, as if caused by a bomb, shot from beneath their feet to above their heads, loudly shaking the subfloat.

Feeling as if her footing might fall out from under her, Yukina instantly grasped onto the walkway’s railing.

“This is...?!”

“What...was that just now?”

When Yukina looked, she saw Nagisa clinging to a post much like Yukina was doing.

But that was the one and only change.

The surface of the subfloat was not shaking. Nor were there waves on the surface of the water. The other visitors to Demon Beast Park continued their sightseeing with smiles.

Yukina and Nagisa were the only ones that’d noticed something was wrong. Only they, both powerful spirit mediums, had detected the invisible shock wave. Probably, it was a surge of demonic energy—furthermore, someone was releasing such explosive demonic energy to rock the entirety of Blue Elysium.

It can't be, thought Yukina as Kojou immediately came to mind. If one of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals was running amok, as had happened several times before, that would explain such a large-scale outbreak of demonic energy.

However, Yukina sensed that the demonic energy clearly had different characteristics than Kojou's.

Besides that, she had a sense that the source of the demonic energy was not within Blue Elysium itself. It seemed to be coming from somewhere farther away—far away from the subfloat, down at the bottom of the sea.

Put another way, even from such a distance, the demonic energy felt like it was on the same scale as one of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals. If that was the case—

Did that make the being giving off that surge of demonic energy an even greater monster than the Fourth Primogenitor...?

A chill ran up Yukina's spine as she arrived at that possibility.

Then, Yukina's thoughts were dragged back to reality by Nagisa's frightful shriek.

"Yukina...the demon beasts are...!"

Falling into a state of terror, the demon beasts lost their heads and raged under the waves. The monstrous makara fish slammed into the side of the water tank, creating an unnerving crack in the reinforced glass. The hippocampus, near the surface of the water, thrashed about, knocking the hip of a trainer and sending him tumbling.

But it was not their intention to attack; they were simply afraid.

The demon beasts, even more sensitive to demonic energy than spirit mediums like Yukina and Nagisa, had sensed that powerful wave of energy, and were now in a hurry to flee the area—

"Urk..." Yukina uneasily bit her lip.

Even knowing the circumstances, she had no way to subdue the demon beasts at the moment. Yukina didn't have Snowdrift Wolf on hand, and either

way, it was impossible for her to subdue every demon beast inside the tank single-handedly. Besides, she was reluctant to kill demon beasts just because they were afraid.

At some point, though, the water tank would break, and the interior of Blue Elysium would doubtless incur immense damage in the process. Likely, it wasn't just the demon beasts in the marine feeding area; those in open areas on the surface must have also been in a panic. If they rampaged outside of Demon Beast Park, even ordinary visitors would be put in danger.

What should I do? thought Yukina, stricken with despair. Then...

“—Calm thyself.”

The quiet voice that came out of Nagisa's lips was haunting. Simultaneously, an explosive wave of demonic energy seemed to chill Yukina's body to the core.

Overwhelmed by the vast demonic energy, the raging demon beasts went silent all at once. Prisoners of fear, plunging their hearts into despair instead rendered them tranquil.

The light filling Nagisa's eyes was as calm and emotionless as a sheet of ice. The supernatural aura that came with it was far beyond an ordinary human's. Someone with mighty demonic energy was possessing Nagisa. Someone with power that rivaled a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—

“You are...?”

Yukina desperately kept her overpowering sense of awe in check, staring at Nagisa as she posed the question. However, right before Yukina's eyes, all the strength in Nagisa's body vanished, like a marionette whose strings had been cut.



The possession had suddenly been lifted, seemingly out of fear of putting too much strain on Nagisa's body.

"Wah...?!"

Having lost her balance, Nagisa was in danger of falling, but Yukina caught her at the last moment. Nagisa shook her head, apparently unaware of what had just occurred to her.

"Ow, ow, ow...er? The cute hippocampus and all the others...?"

"They've...?"

Yukina fell silent, not sure what she ought to tell Nagisa. In her place, they both heard a quiet voice from behind, one neither recognized. It was a refined voice, but one that felt distant, cold, abrupt.

"It would seem they have already calmed down."

Yukina, having sensed no presence prior to hearing the voice, looked back in surprise.

The voice came from a young woman. She was sitting alone on a bench at the edge of the walkway.

The girl was pretty, and her long black hair, worn in an old-fashioned style, suited her well. Her uniform had a black foundation; it came from a well-known private school in Itogami City. She was holding a single-lens reflex camera atop her neat lap. A black cylinder, probably a case for carrying a tripod, was propped against the wall.

"—Am I wrong?"

With Yukina looking back in surprise, the black-haired girl tilted her head. Even though she'd surely seen the demon beasts in a panic up close, she seemed extremely relaxed—to the point that her calm was unnatural.

"No...you are correct."

Yukina nodded, still at a loss. Though it wasn't easy to get a read on the girl before her eyes, she wasn't sensing any hostile intent. She simply seemed to be observing Yukina and Nagisa. Almost like she was observing a diminutive, rare

animal that strayed into her garden—

Seemingly amused by Yukina's bewilderment, the girl asked, "That was scary just now, wasn't it?"

Yukina continued holding Nagisa as she nodded vaguely. "Er, and you are?"

"A photo."

"...Eh?"

"May I...take your photo?"

The black-haired girl gently turned her camera lens toward Yukina and Nagisa. Nervous at the girl's sudden request, Yukina put a hand over her eyes, almost like a celebrity brushing paparazzi aside.

"No...ah, right now this is...private time, you see..."

"Is that so? A pity."

Hearing Yukina's ambiguous excuse, the black-haired girl visibly exhaled slightly. She got to her feet, picking up the tripod case in the process. The corners of her lips rose, as if to say *Farewell*.

"We shall meet again. Probably, anyway. If possible, I would be happy if it were on amicable terms?"

Leaving those final words behind, the black-haired girl turned her back to them. Yukina bit her lip at the girl's words, which seemed to imply something.

Still being supported by Yukina, Nagisa voiced her feelings of admiration. "That person...she's so pretty. And older than us, huh...?"

A spontaneous, strained smile came over Yukina at her friend's unconcerned demeanor. But Nagisa's next words caused Yukina's breath to catch, for Yukina herself had subconsciously realized the same thing...

"—She comes off a little...well, like you, Yukina."

2

At the corner beside a giant pool under the rays of the scorching sun...

A beaming smile came over Asagi Aiba, standing at the cash register of a little food cart. She was wearing a white T-shirt that stood out only for the lame logo on it. It was a staff T-shirt for the franchise Radaman Pavillionz.

“Three *yakisoba* and two oolong teas, a cola, and a melon soda. That comes to two thousand two hundred fifty yen! Kojou!”

“Okay, three *yakisoba* comin’ up!”

With a practiced rhythm, Kojou accepted Asagi’s order. Kojou wore not only the same T-shirt as she did, but a franchise ball cap as well. He stood in front of a sizzling griddle.

“Dahh! The griddle’s so hot... Gonna die! Burn to a crisp! Turn to ash!”

Kojou ceaselessly aired his complaints as he drained grease from the griddle. The steam kicked up from stir-frying bone-in pork and veggies shot up the stall’s discomfort index.

In the first place, they’d come to a resort to have a good time, so why did he have to sell *yakisoba* from a poolside food cart? If anything, it was only natural for him to want to vent his frustrations.

“This wasn’t the deal. Wasn’t this supposed to be a fun resort on the beach?!”

“Oh, be quiet. You’re not the only one hot here, so shut your trap.”

Asagi raged at Kojou, grumbling out loud even as he packed the completed *yakisoba* into a container. As if to underline her words, Asagi was also covered in sweat. The gap left by wearing her hair up to deal with the heat exposed her pale neck, completely drenched with sweat.

“Yeah, but it is really hot, huh... Kojou, make sure you drink extra water. You’ll collapse if you get dehydrated.”

“R-right...”

Kojou audibly gulped as he accepted the drink in a plastic bottle Asagi offered him.

He didn’t know if she was aware of it, but the T-shirt, drenched with sweat, clung to her skin very tightly, making Asagi’s figure quite visible. For some reason, it oddly tugged at his mind more than if she was wandering around in

just a swimsuit. Besides that, her pale thighs poking out under her T-shirt's hem were hard to ignore. He was all the more aware of them because the cramped quarters of the cart put them in close quarters by necessity.

"Kojou...what's wrong?"

Asagi noticed Kojou's unusual behavior and suspiciously drew her face closer. He hastily averted his gaze.

"Ah, no, I just thought, that look is pretty good on you."

"By *that look*, you mean the T-shirt?"

Asagi gazed down at her shirt and exhaled deeply. From the point of view of someone as fashion-conscious as Asagi, she no doubt had objections to the stupid logo on multiple levels.

"Somehow, I don't feel like that's a compliment at all. Thanks, though."

It wasn't the look of her in the T-shirt that Kojou thought suited her—it was the sight of her working at the food stall. Appearances aside, Asagi was a serious girl deep down, someone who worked hard at whatever she did. In spite of subbing as a rookie, she relied on her inherent quick wit and excellent memory, easily dealing with the customers, even the heavy throngs coming in at lunch hour. Besides, the fact Kojou knew her since way back made working together a smooth affair.

Thanks to all that, Kojou and Asagi, rank amateurs, somehow handled the food stall so well that they looked like seasoned veterans to the untrained eye. And as if to underline Kojou's self-assessment, the woman known as chief was in a good mood when she called out to them:

"Good work. You two were amazing. To be honest, I didn't think you'd be anywhere near this useful. I really have to thank Moki for this."

"Errr, Moki?"

Kojou and Asagi were on the verge of bursting out laughing at the cute nickname, one not suiting Yaze at all. Somehow, chief was pals with Yaze as if he was a brother to her, but hearing her so easily call him Moki made her seem very fond of him, indeed. *We've gotta follow up on this*, Asagi conveyed to

Kojou with a look; Kojou concurred via eye contact and a nod.

Chief, not knowing Kojou's and Asagi's thoughts, smiled fondly.

"You're not used to this, so you must be tired. You can take a break one at a time."

"Yes, thank you very much. Kojou, you can go first."

"Sorry. That's a big help."

Kojou wiped the sweat off his brow as he exhaled in relief. Unsurprisingly, he was at the limit of his endurance from standing behind the stupidly hot griddle.

"Oh, yes. I'm heading back to the office, so could you make a delivery for me? Bring it to the monitoring station."

"Sure thing."

Kojou readily accepted chief's request, already in a lighthearted mood from being given a breather. She handed him a tray with a dozen large drinks. It was fairly heavy for one person to carry.

"The monitoring room... Huh, there? The lifeguard center... Wait, that's really far!"

From the Radaman Pavillionz, he could see the building he was delivering to right on the opposite side of the pools. It was well removed, nearly a kilometer on foot. It seemed to be a monitoring station, a clinic, and a lost-and-found center all at once.

"Shit... She tricked me. Chief said she was giving me a break, but she just didn't wanna deliver it herself...!"

Venting the words like they were an evil curse, Kojou grumbled and made his way toward the lifeguard center. Now that he thought about it, Asagi might have let him go on break first because she'd sniffed out chief's intentions.

Even though it was a trial opening, the pool area was still packed. In contrast to Kojou, walking on top of sizzling concrete, the excited people in the water looked very comfortable.

No small measure of jealousy and envy made the heavy tray weigh more in

his arms. Working his way through the labyrinth of pools, Kojou was dead tired by the time he finally made it to his destination.

“Yo... Radaman Pavillionz! I’ve come with your drinks!”

Kojou called into the lifeguard center with the loud, unrestrained voice he’d honed in athletic competitions.

“Ohh, right over here. Been waiting for this.”

A male lifeguard, his skin thoroughly scorched by the sun, poked his head out of the monitoring station. Physically, he was in superb condition. His ripped chest made the T-shirt bulge near the point of ripping.

“...Mm?”

“Wh-what is it?”

Kojou’s body went rigid upon being thoroughly scrutinized. Mr. Lifeguard was silent as he worked his way around Kojou’s flank.

“What’s your name?”

“Kojou! Kojou Akatsuki.”

“Hmm...your body’s surprisingly nice. Would you like to become a lifeguard? I can introduce you to qualified trainers right here. There’s a fully equipped training studio just for staff.”

As he spoke, the man gently rubbed Kojou’s back like he was sizing up the state of Kojou’s muscles.

“N-nah, I’ll pass. I’m already working part-time and all.”

“That so. Give me a holler if you change your mind. Saving lives is good work!”

Mr. Lifeguard patted his own hip and laughed out loud in delight. Kojou’s smiling face twitched as he lowered his head and left the monitoring station to make his escape. If he let the guy go on, he’d end up lifting weights with him in short order. It wasn’t that he had a problem with exercising, but there was no way he was interested in pumping iron with an overbearing bodybuilder on a ridiculously hot day.

“...Geez... All that so-called break time’s gonna be all used up...”

Kojou weakly sighed as he gazed up at a clock on the lifeguard center's wall.

For some reason, the sight of a little girl entering his field of vision that moment tugged at his attention.

The young girl was wearing a hooded nylon parka over a two-piece blue swimsuit. She was probably eleven or twelve years old. She'd drawn the bulky hood of her parka rather tight as she sat down at the lost-and-found station all alone.

Realizing that Kojou had set eyes upon her, the girl suddenly turned her head away. The conspicuous hair she wore down to her shoulders swayed gently.

Then, the girl stood up and walked to the counter and said, "Thank you very much. I've found the person I'm with, so I'm all right now. You've been a big help."

Then she formally bowed her head to the staffer.

For a girl who's lost, she's very well-behaved, thought Kojou with a touch of admiration. It seemed there was no need for him to worry about it. With that judgment in mind, Kojou headed back to the stall once more.

"—You're late!"

Waiting for Kojou on his return to the food cart was a resentful stare from a very peevish Asagi. Apparently, she'd been running the food cart pretty much single-handedly while Kojou was out making the delivery. And right at that time, a group of guests had packed the place, making the area around the kitchen look as desperate as the aftermath of a typhoon. Asagi was completely irate from being so busy.

"Well, sorry! The delivery destination was far away, so I couldn't help it!"

"Hmmm..."

Asagi fixed her gaze on something as Kojou defended himself. For some reason, her expression was one of open scorn.

"So what's with the girl? You're not going to tell me you've been flirting with her, are you?"

"...Flirting?"

What are you talking about? thought Kojou, perplexed, as he looked over his shoulder, following Asagi's gaze. There stood an elementary schooler he recognized instantly: the girl wearing the nylon hooded jacket. Her hair was as brightly colored as cat's fur; combined with her big eyes, she definitely gave off the impression of a temperamental kitten.

The girl was standing still behind Kojou, staring at his back without a word.

"Er? Weren't you the lost girl back near the lifeguard center...?"

When Kojou addressed her in surprise, the young girl meekly nodded. Her big eyes seemed full of conflicted emotions: a mix of wariness and hope.

"Eguchi. Yume Eguchi."

The girl named herself in a stiff voice. Kojou was a little perplexed by her reaction.

"...Yume?" he asked.

"Yes. Perhaps you think it is a strange, childish name... I'm sorry."

"That so? I think it's a nice, ordinary name. And it's cute, right?"

Kojou said exactly what he was thinking. In the first place, he'd met people with far stranger names to date, so one more was no big deal; and if you were going to talk about names, "Kojou" was odd enough.

However, Kojou's reply apparently struck the girl as somewhat unexpected. Her big eyes blinked twice, and after that, her cheeks reddened as she lowered her face.

"Is—is that so. Even if it is just flattery, I'm happy."

"—What are you doing, sweet-talking a little girl like that?!"

The next moment, out of the blue, Asagi smacked Kojou in the back of the head. *I didn't do anything*, went Kojou with tearful eyes, glaring back at Asagi over the absurdity of it all.

"But anyway, Yume, you said? You're at this stall looking for someone?"

"No need for concern, you are the one I was looking for. You are Kojou Akatsuki, yes?"

As Yume spoke those words, she looked up at Kojou and stared. The girl was holding a photo in her hands that had signs of having been torn.

“How do you know my name? This is the first time we’ve met, right?”

“Your lover told me about you, Mr. Kojou, and that I could rely on you if I was ever in trouble.”

“L-lover...?!” Asagi shrieked. Her incredible glare made Kojou hastily shake his head.

“No, I don’t know anything about that! I don’t have a clue who she means!”

“Er, this may not be any of my business, but I think cheating is wrong. Two-timing is simply...”

Yume, watching the exchange between Kojou and Asagi, spoke her admonition in a very chaste, little-girl manner. Kojou groaned, clutching his head.

“I am not! Who whispered that garbage into your ears?!” he retorted.

“...A very pretty, tall older girl. She had large breasts, and she wore her hair like this.”

“...A girl with huge breasts and a ponytail... Couldn’t be...”

“Kirasaka?”

Listening to Yume’s explanation, Kojou’s and Asagi’s eyes met.

Somehow she got the weird idea that I’m that man-hater’s lover, mused Kojou, craning his neck as he puzzled over the outlandish notion. In contrast, Asagi just said, “I see,” believing that to make perfect sense.

Kojou, regaining his senses, asked, “Wait, if you met Kirasaka, she’s here on Blue Ely, too? What’s your connection to her?”

Yume’s expression darkened as she haltingly replied, “That person...came to rescue me while I was locked away.”

“Locked away...?”

Kojou’s look became grave at the somber words coming from Yume’s mouth. Kidnapping, confinement, or even human trafficking—all kinds of unpleasant

implications Kojou didn't especially want to imagine rose in the back of his mind one after another. With the exception of Kojou's group, everyone invited to Blue Elysium's trial opening was a specially invited guest—in other words, wealthy VIPs from high society or their family members. It wouldn't be strange for one of them to be a kidnapping target.

Besides, if Yume had been involved in a kidnapping incident, it would explain why Sayaka rescued her. She was a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, tasked with countering sorcerous crimes. It was entirely possible they were investigating the organization that had confined Yume.

"So where is Kirasaka right now?"

"I do not know..."

Yume's frail voice shuddered at Kojou's impromptu question. As Kojou watched, her eyes grew watery and then erupted in a deluge of tears. Yume's desperate attempts to hold her emotions back had come crashing down from Kojou's one careless remark, causing everything to pour out at once.

"We were running away, and then the people chasing us found us. She said, 'Yume, go on ahead. I'll catch up with you soon.' But no matter how long I waited, she never came, and then—"

Yume spoke in a weak, faltering voice, sobbing several times. When Kojou saw Yume begin to cry, his nervousness made everything in his head go blank.

"Ah, w-wait...don't cry! Er, don't cry, Yume! Right, *yakisoba*, here, have some *yakisoba*! There's juice, too!"

"...Seriously, what do you think you're doing?"

Asagi limply cupped her cheek as she gazed at Kojou desperately consoling Yume.

It seemed, once again, they had become involved in some kind of troublesome incident.

Kojou and Asagi's shift ended at five PM. Chief was somewhat disappointed to see them go, but she said that they'd be serving alcoholic beverages from that time onward, so they couldn't make minors work any later.

Kojou, dead tired from making all that *yakisoba*, dragged his body along as he left the Radaman Pavillionz office. He was carrying a soundly sleeping Yume on his back. Meeting Kojou and Asagi seemed to cut right through all her tension as if it were frail string; Yume had cried herself straight to sleep.

Asagi grimaced as she tapped at her beloved smartphone. "...No good. The name *Yume Eguchi* isn't in Itogami Island's residency records."

Asagi had apparently infiltrated the Gigafloat Management Corporation's servers and accessed personal data. She'd no doubt thought she could clear up Yume's identity, allowing them to contact her guardians, but—

"I checked demon registration just to see, but no matches. I can't find any past records of her, either."

"...Meaning Yume doesn't live in Itogami City?"

"Probably not. I doubt she's using an alias, after all."

"Yeah, that figures."

Kojou agreed with Asagi's hypothesis. Yume's reaction to Kojou praising her name looked extremely natural; neither thought it was an act. Besides, they couldn't think of a reason for her to use a fake name with two people she'd met for the first time.

"Blue Ely's a tourist trap...so it wouldn't be strange if she flew in from the mainland."

"Looks like it. So what'll you do? Try bringing her to the police?" Asagi inquired as she watched Yume's sleeping face.

If what Yume said was true, she was a kidnapping victim. It was possible that Yume's parents had already requested the police search for her. Common sense dictated that handing her over to police custody was safest, but...

"No, I want to have Himeragi meet her before going to the cops."

"...Himeragi?"

“Maybe I’m overthinking this, but Sayaka rescuing this girl kind of bothers me. Maybe the guys who kidnapped Yume are out of the reach of normal cops.”

That’d make this a lot more trouble, though, thought Kojou with a sigh.

If the Lion King Agency was involved, odds were high that the kidnappers were demonic or sorcerous criminals. If they came raiding to take Yume back, ordinary police officers would prove little more than speed bumps.

If that was the case, she was safer in the hands of Kojou’s group. Kojou notwithstanding, Yukina was a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—an expert in anti-demonic combat. Small doubt Sayaka had handed Yume over to Kojou so he could put her under Yukina’s protection.

“Hmmm. That’s right... She’s in the same group as that Kirasaka girl, the Lion King Agency?”

Asagi’s question somehow seemed to have an undertone of dissatisfaction.

It had only been in very recent days that Asagi had learned of Kojou becoming a vampire and the truth of Yukina being his watcher. Albeit an entirely natural reaction, Asagi seemed to still be holding a grudge at having been the only one not let in on the secret for all that time.

Well, I understand how she feels..., thought Kojou, shrugging his shoulders with Yume still on his back.

“She seems to be in a different section than Himeragi, but, hmm, we should at least ask her what the deal is, right?”

In spite of being part of the same organization, Sword Shaman Yukina and Shamanic War Dancer Sayaka seemed to have completely separate chains of command. There were many things each wasn’t privy to concerning the other’s missions.

Kojou had wondered if the reason Sayaka called Kojou over the phone once in a while to grill him about how Yukina was doing was because she didn’t have permission to contact Yukina directly. But that made asking Kojou, the target of Yukina’s monitoring, seem wrong somehow.

“So what kind of organization is the Lion King Agency?”

“Er, I was told it’s a federal agency established by the, er...National Public Safety Commission. Its main duty is stopping large-scale sorcerous disasters and terrorism, or so I heard.”

Kojou was voicing the knowledge he remembered from his having asked Yukina a while back. Apparently, a direct line could be traced from the Takiguchi Musha warriors protecting the imperial throne from the supernatural way back in the Heian period. So those charged with directly combatting demons became Sword Shamans; those assigned to suppressing rebellions and protecting VIPs became Shamanic War Dancers.

The gist was, Sword Shamans dispatched demons and Shamanic War Dancers countered terrorism. Yukina, a Sword Shaman, was watching Kojou because he was somehow viewed no different from a monster himself.

“Hmmm... So how big is the organization? How many people work for it? How much are they paid? Benefits?”

“I haven’t asked all that. Besides, you’re the one who specializes in checking things, right?”

“I investigated, but I have nothing to show for it. It’s like an urban legend. There’s so much disinformation out there that I can’t get anything solid. Plus, a lot of organizations like that have closed networks cut off from the Net, so I don’t have a direct line.” Asagi pouted childishly. Even a genius hacker like her could not pull up information if it wasn’t even on the Net to begin with.

“Well, if it bothers you, why don’t you just ask Himeragi yourself? I’m not sure how much she actually knows, though.”

Then he added in a low murmur, “She’s some sort of apprentice and stuff.”

It wasn’t boasting to say Yukina was top tier when it came to combat ability, but there was no dressing up the fact that her knowledge wasn’t well-rounded. She seemed ill informed about the internal structure and the politics of her organization.

“...More importantly, why don’t *you* know at least that much? That girl’s been shadowing you for over three months, right?” the cyber hacker teased.

“Couldn’t help it, I wasn’t interested. What, is not knowing a problem?”

“I’d say not knowing is dangerous.”

“...Dangerous?”

Kojou was bewildered and lost, but the look Asagi shot him was abnormally serious.

You know, when she looks like that, she’s pretty beautiful, thought Kojou, the feeling being quite out of place. Asagi seemed to read Kojou’s mind, sighing loudly with an exasperated look.

“Government agency means it’s just one department in the end. It doesn’t mean they don’t have turf wars with other agencies when their interests don’t align. It also doesn’t mean there aren’t internal disputes.”

“Yukina and Sayaka get along really well, though. They’re kind of like sisters.”

“Even if two people get along like that, that doesn’t mean organizations do. You have no idea about the state of relations among the Lion King Agency and the police and other organizations, do you?”

“...Wait, you’re saying this is related to Yume’s kidnapping?”

Kojou posed the question in a low voice so as not to rouse Yume from her slumber. He was finally getting a vague idea of just what Asagi was concerned about.

“I don’t know if it’s related, I just think you shouldn’t trust them unconditionally. I mean, the Lion King Agency as an organization, regardless of what you might think of Yukina and Sayaka personally.”

“It’s not that I really trust them or anything...”

After all, Kojou was someone the Lion King Agency had on strict observation. For that matter, it was a standing threat to stab him with a holy spear and slay him outright.

“But I get what you’re tryin’ to say. It doesn’t mean that what Sayaka’s bunch is doing is real justice. Yume’s not necessarily an ordinary little girl, either.”

“Well, yeah.”

Asagi smiled sarcastically, seemingly blushing over her not being the type to

have a serious talk like that.

“Justice and wickedness can easily swap places depending on the place where you stand. Whether it’s people or organizations, there’s always an underside to them.”

“Yeah, could be,” Kojou said with a vague nod of affirmation.

Yume had told them she’d been confined and that Sayaka had enabled her to escape. Hence, Kojou had trusted Yume. Kojou had assumed all on his own that Sayaka had entered combat with a criminal organization to save Yume.

But he’d been wrong. He couldn’t decide that it was so. After all, the Lion King Agency wasn’t an organization of superheroes rescuing people unconditionally. The odds that Yume was a captured criminal, and that Sayaka had knowingly busted her out of jail, were not zero.

If that was the case, it made Kojou and the others criminal co-conspirators for harboring Yume.

“That said... First of all, do you really think she could be a bad person?”

Kojou spoke in a casual voice as he pointed at Yume’s defenseless, sleeping face.

“Umm.” Asagi faltered, seeming to come to her senses as she made that quiet sound. “...She really doesn’t look it, does she? Even if she was bad to the bone, just abandoning the girl is a little...”

“Darn right. Anyway, let’s get back to the cottage. We’ll think about what to do later. Yaze said there were beds to spare, right?”

Then Kojou added, “No point in us worrying about things we can’t know,” suggesting they kick the can down the road. *No objections here*, the flippant silent wave of Asagi’s hand seemed to say.

Kojou and the others were headed toward the pool area’s central bus stop. He’d been told that the driverless buses looped around the interior of Blue Elysium, and that riding them would get them back to the cottage free of charge.

However, just before they crossed an intersection, Asagi noticed something

and stopped in her tracks when she said, “Wait. Kojou, do you have money on you at the moment?”

“Well, I do have my wallet with me... Why?”

“We’d better buy Yume a change of clothes before we get back to the cottage. We can’t have her wandering around in a swimsuit forever, can we? Gotta buy something for her to wear.”

“Ahh, you do have a point...”

She’s sharp, thought Kojou with admiration, fishing his wallet out of the pocket of his swimming trunks.

“Wait, you mean I’m paying?! You have your wallet, too, don’t you?!”

“You’re the one who picked her up. Ask for Kirasaka to pay you back later. Have her bill it as an expense. Hmm, that’s right, there was a slightly good-looking boutique up ahead here...”

“...Maybe it’s my imagination, but I feel like you’re gonna buy something really expensive...”

“It’s a high-end brand that just hit Japan’s shores for the first time. They say it even supplies the Royal Family of Aldegia.”

“Whoa?!”

Brooking no dissent, Asagi snatched Kojou’s wallet from his hands and headed straight for the high-end-brand store. With her mind clearly set on spending a lot more than necessary, Kojou went pale and followed her in a hurry.

4

Asagi, returning to the cottage with the large quantity of clothes she purchased, immediately began sorting out the goods. Yume had yet to awaken, sleeping on a bed in the girls’ room.

Left with nothing to do, Kojou went into the bath. As he used soap to thoroughly wash his body, stinking of salt air and *yakisoba* sauce, he heard a ruckus around the entrance. Apparently Yukina and Nagisa, off doing other

things, had returned to the cottage.

What somehow struck him as odd was how quiet Nagisa seemed. Notorious for the sheer volume of her words, she was hardly saying anything at all. Instead, he heard Yukina's voice, speaking with an undertone of concern.

"...Are you all right, Nagisa? The color of your lips is quite..."

"Yeah, I'm okay, I'm okay. I'll bounce back as soon as I rest a bit."

He felt like Nagisa was leaning on Yukina's shoulder, smiling weakly. Her voice sounded frail and shaking, almost like a whisper that threatened to vanish at any moment.

"...Nagisa?!"

Kojou got out of the tub in a hurry, not taking the time to dry his hair. Yukina's eyes widened when she noticed Kojou was still topless. Kojou was in shock as Nagisa limply waved toward him.

"Ah, Kojou. You got back first. Work wear you out?"

"This ain't the time for casual greetings!"

Kojou was completely beside himself, his voice coming out shrill. Nagisa always acted so lively, but it absolutely wasn't because she was blessed with endurance. She'd been in and out of the hospital regularly leading up to the last year, and she'd collapsed from anemia only a couple of weeks prior.

"Himeragi, tell me. Did Nagisa collapse again?"

"No, that's...erm..."

When he pressed the point with Yukina, she somehow seemed conflicted as she averted her eyes.

"Tee-hee," Nagisa giggled, smiling like a naughty child, even as Yukina kept her on her feet.

"Er, well, she rode the roller coaster in the amusement park area three times in a row and ended up...like this."

".....Roller coaster?"

"Yeah well, it's that 'Hades' roller coaster plunging into the water Blue Ely's

famous for, see. It goes up to ninety-seven meters and drops to hit the water at one hundred seventy kilometers per hour. Really packs a punch.”

“That’d bowl normal people over! Why’d you ride that thing three times in a row?!”

Nagisa’s unrepentant retelling sent Kojou yelling and staring back at her in shock. Nagisa puffed her cheeks at the scolding.

“I mean, we got to ride it for free, so I thought it’d be a shame not to ride it a bunch of times. With you and Asagi heading off, even if we went to the pool, we wouldn’t have anyone to show our swimsuits off to, and that’s boring. I’m sure Yukina thought the same thing deep down.”

“Huh...?!”

Yukina, taken completely by surprise, immediately froze in place, unable to get a single word in. However, Kojou casually brushed aside Nagisa’s last statement.

“Never mind that, go rest a while. I’ll wake you up when supper’s ready, all right?”

“Okay!”

Still peevish, Nagisa gave a grudging reply and flopped onto the living room sofa. Whatever her protests, she really was exhausted; she was making little sleeping sounds in short order.

Kojou sighed as he watched all that and turned toward Yukina, standing still in the hallway.

“Sorry she caused you trouble.”

“Never mind that, is it...is that...?”

“Er...Himeragi?”

“No, never mind.”

Yukina’s stare conveyed no emotions.

Kojou, unable to grasp why she was in a sour mood, was a bit thrown off as he said, “Well, anyway, sorry to drop this on you just after you got back, but I want

you to meet someone. Could you come with me for a bit?"

"Ah, yes."

Perhaps Kojou had conveyed how serious he was, because Yukina immediately nodded in spite of her dubious expression.

Kojou led her up the cottage's staircase, heading toward the girls' room on the second floor. That was where Asagi and the still-sleeping Yume ought to have been.

"...Look, Himeragi. Don't act surprised, and just listen to this Yume girl's story nice and calmly."

"R-right."

Kojou scrupulously prepared Yukina beforehand to be as considerate as he could. To Yukina, she and Sayaka were former roommates and practically sisters. That same Sayaka might have faced danger. It wasn't a given that Yukina would hold it together when she learned that, so Kojou thought it was best to emotionally prepare her as much as possible before meeting Yume. The look Yukina gave Kojou was more suspicious still, but that amount of wariness was a good thing, in his book.

So with those thoughts, Kojou reached for the doorknob to the girls' room.

"Asagi, I'm comin' in."

"—Huh?! W-wait a sec...!"

As Kojou indiscreetly opened the door, what flew into his field of vision was the sight of Asagi and Yume, sitting half-naked on top of the bed. They were right in the middle of changing clothes.

Yume was in relatively good shape, her back turned to Kojou while she pulled on a dress from the head down, but Asagi had just a moment ago started to put on her swimsuit. She had her bikini in her right hand, with only her left hand covering her breasts. Kojou, emotionally unprepared for this, froze dumbfounded with both still in his sights.

"Uh...uhhh?"

"Don't *uhh* me! What are you doing coming into a girl's room without

knocking?!”

Asagi got up and hurled a bedside alarm clock. It sailed straight and true, slugging Kojou straight in the gut as he stood still and defenseless.



“Guoah!”

Kojou groaned in anguish as he was driven out into the hallway.

Yukina closed the door to the girls’ room without a word. She looked down at Kojou, wilting from agony, and earnestly sighed.

“Senpai...”

5

That day, they had barbecue for supper, both because the cottage came with its own grill, and because Yaze, off doing stuff on his own, had returned with a large amount of meat in tow.

“Hyaaa! Meat, meat, baby!”

Amid the faint darkness of evening, Yaze boisterously raised his excited voice. Standing by Kojou, who was babysitting the charcoal fire, Yaze steadily chewed on grilled meat as he said, “Why don’t you have some, Kojou? It’s some gorgeous, high-priced fresh meat provided by yours truly!”

“Oh, shut up, I’ll eat it! Help me grill it a little more. It’s hot, dammit! And what’s this ‘high-priced fresh-meat’ crap... There’s big ‘for quick sale’ stickers all over the packages, aren’t there?!”

Is he really the son of a rich family? wondered Kojou suspiciously, fanning the charcoal.

And if I came here to have fun at resort pools, why’d I have to spend the first day standing in front of a griddle? he asked himself. Being bathed in the heat of the charcoal fire from up close was draining his stamina faster than he’d expected.

“Come to think of it, Yaze—where did you go off all alone while we were working?”

“Mm, I told ya. Had to help with the family business,” Yaze answered while nibbling on a freshly grilled rib.

Kojou shot him a skeptical look. “What kind of help made you have to come

to a tourist trap?”

“Well, inspecting the island interior. I had to see how easy it is for ordinary folks to use the facilities, rate the services provided by staff, then take some photos for the public website...”

“Photos? Can I have a little look?”

“Fgnn...?!”

Before Yaze, in the middle of eating, could give a reply, Kojou took his digital camera and turned the power on. The LCD screen displayed the sight of Kojou and Asagi working harmoniously at the food cart.

Gwah! went Kojou, unwittingly clearing his throat.

“Why you—what inspection?! This is just photography!”

“No, no, you’re wrong, that was just a little bonus. The other part was the real job. There’s pictures of pretty girls playing around in the pool on there, too—”

“That’s even worse!”

Kojou chose to delete all the incriminating data without a moment’s hesitation. “Uwaaaaa,” Yaze lamented, half crying as the meat began to overcook.

“Yahoo, meat!”

Unrelated to Yaze and Kojou, Nagisa got all fired up with Yume at her side.

Nagisa, apparently bounced back from the roller coaster rendering her punch-drunk, had apparently taken a liking to Yume, not letting the girl out of her sight since they met. As the youngest sibling, she couldn’t help but be happy from feeling like she had a little sister of her own.

“But I’m so surprised. Who would’ve expected Kojou to pick up a cute girl like this?”

Nagisa praised him in apparent admiration. “Hmm,” went Yaze, folding his arms as he solemnly agreed.

“You’ve restored my faith in you. You’re unusually gifted at sweet-talking elementary schoolers. Man, you’re not a siskon for nothin’.”

“Siscon has nothing to do with it, geez!” To get his point across further, he offered the rebuttal, “And I don’t like my sister to begin with,” but everyone present silently disregarded him. Even so, Kojou did not give in, straining his voice further.

“I told you earlier, she’s with a friend of Himeragi’s. I’m just takin’ care of her until she gets in touch and picks her up—”

Kojou continued making excuses as Nagisa turned her back to him, setting grilled meat aside for Yume’s sake.

“Yume, have some, too. Don’t hold back.”

Yume, fully changed into an adorable one-piece dress, lowered her head in proper politeness.

“Yes, thank you for the food. Also, Nagisa, I think it is best that you eat some more vegetables. Eating only meat is not good for a balanced diet.”

“Hmm...you have a point there. Yet, Yume, you say that but you still have some carrots left over.”

Nagisa smiled teasingly as she pointed that out. Yume looked down guiltily.

“That’s...er, carrots are the only ones I have trouble with. I can eat them when they’re grated and put into curry, though.”

The glimpse of Yume acting her own age made Nagisa writhe around, eyes sparkling.

“S-so cute...! Kojou, I’m going to make curry right now!”

“Calm down. Just make curry for supper tomorrow.”

Kojou, somehow managing to calm the excited Nagisa, felt weary as he shook his head. Then, Kojou’s eyes shifted to Asagi, who was sitting on the edge of a bench. Since earlier, she hadn’t even touched her food, sullenly gazing at the sea instead.

Seeing Asagi like that, Kojou got up and said, “Asagi, the...meat’s grilled. Here’s...your chopsticks. For dip, this is the sweet and that’s the medium spicy.”

He went out of his way to bring her a tray of food. However, Asagi snatched

the chopsticks from Kojou without a word, giving him a sidelong wave as if to say *Get lost*.

What's with her? Kojou returned to the others with a disgruntled look.

Yume asked in a considerate tone, "...You haven't apologized yet? For earlier."

Kojou wearily hung his head. "I have, a whole bunch of times. But she's still holding a grudge and making a big deal out of it."

"I do not believe Asagi is genuinely angry... Rather, you are simply clumsy at following up."

Yume's advice came in a reserved tone.

Kojou tapered his lips. "I don't get it. You say follow up... I am sorry for going in without knocking, but she's the one who forgot to lock the door, and she slugged me in the gut with an alarm clock, right?"

"I do not believe you should take that attitude. Even though Asagi was wearing a new swimsuit at the time, you did not say one word about it. Even the Western clothes she is wearing now are ones she picked after changing several times."

"...Huh? What does that have to do with anything?"

Not understanding what she meant, Kojou posed the question with a completely serious look. In the first place, what ought he have said to her when she was only wearing the bottom part?

Yume sighed deeply in apparent resignation. She watched Kojou with a slightly resentful look.

"Also, it is not only Asagi who was seen changing clothes..."

"Ah...errr... S-sorry about that. Very sorry."

"Understood. I forgive you."

Yume smiled teasingly as she watched Kojou lower his head. She was still a little red under the eyes, probably from having cried herself to sleep. Even though her demeanor looked stouthearted, Yume's position was fundamentally as uncertain as it was before.

One effect of Kojou's having muddied the waters by entering the girls' room during her changing was that he had yet to ask Yume the details about her confinement. Yume herself seemed torn as to how she should explain.

Even so, Kojou and the others could not simply continue grilling meat forever.

“—Senpai, thank you very much for the cell phone.”

Having quietly returned from the cottage, Yukina tendered the cell phone she'd borrowed from Kojou. She'd been calling the Lion King Agency to get a read on the situation.

“How about it? Could you get in touch with Kirasaka?” Kojou asked in a low voice, meeting Yukina's gaze.

She quietly shook her head and said, “No. It is strictly forbidden for Shamanic War Dancers to communicate with others while on a mission. To begin with, they are covert operatives engaged in curses and assassination... Ah, there are rather few assassination missions nowadays, but work protecting VIPs and infiltration and sabotage have increased by equal measure.”

“I see... Now that you mention it, can't have info leaking out when you're doing any of those jobs, huh?”

Kojou grimaced, accepting her explanation. If even the Lion King Agency HQ had no contact with Sayaka from regular reports, there probably was no way to get in touch with her at all. That explained why Sayaka hadn't answered Kojou's own repeated calls.

“Yes. That is why I could not tell Sayaka about the details of my own mission.”

Yukina lowered her eyes as she murmured with regret. She was still like that when Kojou said, “Hey,” handing her a plate with grilled meat.

“Sorry, thank you very much for the food,” Yukina said as she accepted it. “But Master said that no Shamanic War Dancer has been dispatched in Sayaka's place.”

“...Master... Ohh, you mean Professor Kitty...”

Kojou remembered having met Yukina's teacher at the Lion King Agency branch office. Though, he'd only set eyes on her feline familiar when they'd

“met” ...

“In other words, Sayaka’s still on her mission?”

“At the very least, I believe it is certain she is still alive.”

Yukina replied in a strong tone of voice, almost like she was saying it for her own benefit.

They did not know Sayaka’s purpose in coming to Blue Elysium. But if she was unable to continue her mission, the Lion King Agency would surely have immediately dispatched another Shamanic War Dancer. Put another way, the fact a replacement Shamanic War Dancer was not on the way meant they could deduce Sayaka was safe and sound.

“But if that’s the case, why doesn’t she come for Yume?”

“I do not know...though it is possible she thinks Yume is safe under your protection. After all, as guardians of elementary schoolers might go, you would be the World’s Mightiest.”

“Er, that seems wrong, somehow...”

Kojou was caught off guard by the pun in Yukina’s metaphor, as it could more than likely cause some sort of misunderstanding. The Fourth Primogenitor might be the World’s Mightiest Vampire, but talking about him like the world’s most zealous protector of little girls put him in a bind.

In the first place, Kojou didn’t think Sayaka trusted him quite that much. Besides, that was the kind of time when Sayaka would come to visit Yukina, making a grand entrance. She, wanting to meet Yukina so badly under normal conditions, would never willingly miss a perfect opportunity like that.

That being the case, Sayaka really must have had a good reason why she couldn’t rendezvous with Yume. Somehow, she’d apparently landed herself in a more troublesome spot than she’d anticipated.

“Er...perhaps she might have attempted to meet Riru?”

Yume haltingly opened her mouth in apparent consideration for Kojou and Yukina, who had fallen silent. Kojou narrowed his eyes in mild surprise.

“Riru? Who’s that?”

“My older sister.”

“Your older sister...?”

“Yes. She was confined in the Kusuki-Elysée laboratory with me.”

Yume explained with a minimum of words. Kojou and Yukina made eye contact and silently nodded together.

That there was another girl besides Yume in similar circumstances was unexpected information; on the other hand, it explained something significant: namely, why Yume was able to remain so mysteriously calm when she had been locked away, and how she was able to behave so firmly at the moment. The hypothesis that Sayaka was searching for this Riru girl the entire time felt like a convincing explanation, setting those doubts aside.

“Kusuki-Elysée, I feel like I’ve heard that somewhere before...”

“It’s the name of a Blue Elysium investor. I believe he is the chief financier for Demon Beast Park.”

Yukina immediately answered Kojou’s question. After all, she and Nagisa had visited Demon Beast Park but a few hours before.

“That so. It was on a Blue Ely pamphlet... Right, it was a corporation that imports, exports, and breeds demon beasts for industrial stuff...”

After hearing that, Kojou’s expression went rigid. If Yume’s words were the truth, she wasn’t involved in any mere kidnapping incident. This was organized crime involving a major corporation.

“—Then that’d make the company running Blue Ely the mastermind behind Yume and Riru’s kidnapping?”

“If so, I can understand why the Lion King Agency would dispatch Sayaka. It is up to Sayaka and those like her to deal with organized international sorcerous crime.”

Yukina’s expression also went rigid as she made the statement. Kusuki-Elysée was a well-known corporation. Even the Lion King Agency could not lay a finger upon it without solid evidence. That was surely why Sayaka had been sent to covertly investigate. After all, a Shamanic War Dancer with assassination skills

was the kind of person you'd send to infiltrate the enemy's camp.

"But...I don't get it."

Kojou picked at the vegetables on top of his plate of hot food as he murmured, looking deep in thought.

"The Lion King Agency knows that Yume's with us, right? So why didn't they say anything? Aren't Yume's parents worried about her?"

"...Perhaps they intend to employ us as a decoy."

Yukina's hesitant murmur was in such a quiet voice that Kojou barely heard it.

"You mean they're waiting for Kusuki-Elysée to come take Yume back?"

Kojou watched Yukina with a grave look. Yukina shook her head, almost as if taking back her own opinion.

"Of course, that is not set in stone."

"No, but...now that I think about it, it makes sense."

Kojou accepted the thought with a bitter look.

Certainly, it was difficult for the Lion King Agency to infiltrate the Kusuki-Elysée facility. But if someone from Kusuki-Elysée came of their own will, that was a different story. That went double if it was for the purpose of abducting a little schooler; there'd be nothing to stop an arrest in that case.

So maybe the Lion King Agency was waiting for Kusuki-Elysée to make a move and try to recapture Yume. That would give them a powerful card to play for squishing Kusuki-Elysée flat. Furthermore, they had a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency protecting their decoy, Yume. There was no way they wouldn't exploit the coincidence.

"However, there are issues with such an operation. After all, compared to the Kusuki-Elysée company, you are far more dangerous, senpai. To involve you, when you are a source of much more trouble for others and a far greater menace...!"

Yukina didn't even realize she was putting Kojou down in an ultra-serious tone. Kojou uttered a low groan. He felt like she'd said something rather rude

toward him, but he could not manage a rebuttal. At any rate, Kojou had previously allowed the power of the Fourth Primogenitor to run amok, inflicting grave damage to Itogami Island; a reoccurrence on Blue Elysium would likely cause it to sink into the sea without a trace. Yukina was right to be worried.

In the first place, Yume being a decoy was a hypothesis, no more than speculation on their part. They couldn't dismiss the possibility that the Lion King Agency and Kusuki-Elysée were after something completely different.

"Hey, Yume... What did Kusuki-Elysée want you two locked up for, anyway?" Kojou, still holding serving tongs, turned to Yume. "Ahh, of course you don't have to say anything if you don't want to answer that. But if your older sister's in any kind of trouble, it's best to help her as fast as possible, right? Can you at least tell us if she's in danger?"

"—I believe you do not need to worry about Riru." Yume's declaration was firm. Her voice was full of certainty, sounding nothing like bluff or bluster. "In the first place, Riru is who the people at Kusuki-Elysée need, not me. They surely will not hurt her. Besides, Riru has been cooperating with their experiment from the beginning."

"Experiment?"

"That is... I'm sorry...I do not want to speak of it right now."

"Nah, sorry for asking. I promised you didn't have to say, right?"

Kojou lowered his head in a hurry. Even if she spoke like an adult, this was a little girl, an elementary schooler confined by a group for some crazy reason. It wasn't exactly a shock she didn't want to think about an unpleasant experiment. Even Kojou understood it was bad to try to push her to talk about it.

"Ah... All this using my head more than usual is making me hungry. Let me eat up for a bit."

Kojou quickly changed the subject before it made Yume depressed. Besides, he really was hungry. He'd been grilling so much meat for everyone else that he hadn't laid a single finger on it.

But the meat had already vanished from the cooking pot; there were only

scraps of boiled cabbages, quietly simmering away.

“—Er, wha—? Where’d the beef go? Hey, Yaze, wasn’t there more meat that hadn’t been grilled yet?”

Kojou questioned Yaze, sitting on a bench and eating ice cream for desert. *Kinda late to be asking that* was written all over Yaze’s face as he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Oh, that stuff, well... Asagi grilled and ate it all.”

“A-all of it?!”

When Kojou examined further, he saw that the meat tray Yaze had bought was completely empty and had been thrust into a garbage bag. And it wasn’t just the meat: All the veggies and various kinds of mushrooms had been wiped out, too. Kojou gaped as he took that in. To begin with, the meat Yaze had bought should have been enough for over ten people.

“Hmph.”

With Kojou stunned and speechless, Asagi glared sidelong at him and snorted with satisfaction. In contrast to her slender appearance, she had quite an appetite. Kojou cursed that he’d allowed himself to forget that fact.

As Kojou put a hand on his empty belly and groaned in agony, Asagi was finally in a better mood. Yume looked between the two and broke into giggles.

Then Nagisa, having finished eating her own ice cream in silence, hopped to her feet and said, “Whew! ...I sure am full. Hey, Yaze. Let’s do some fireworks! You said you bought some earlier. I really like the showy ones that make lots of sparks.”

“Oh...you have fireworks? Really?” Yume raised her face, her eyes glittering.

With Yume looking like that, Nagisa turned to her and reached out with a hand.

“Come on over, Yume. Let’s watch them together.”

“Yes!”

The glow of dazzling fireworks shone upon Yume’s face. Kojou absentmindedly stared at the sight of Yume innocently excited, like any ordinary girl.

And yet somehow, that smile felt exceedingly fleeting, even lonely.

Night befell Blue Elysium—the “blue paradise” wrought by man.

6

Demon Beast Park boasted a vast expanse of land, but the areas of the facility open to the public did not even amount to 40 percent. The remaining 60-odd percent was dedicated to keeping and feeding the demon beasts, and housing a research ward where their abilities were analyzed.

In this latter section where cutting-edge research was being conducted, access was granted to a precious few, even among Kusuki-Elysée, the financing body behind Demon Beast Park.

And there, in the deepest part of the research ward, was an unscheduled guest.

He was an adult man with a tight physique. He wore a sharp-looking, expensive white suit—he was around thirty, give or take a few years. He came across as a man of intellect who lacked human warmth.

In the office, a black-haired girl wearing a high school uniform came to greet him.

“We have been awaiting you, Chairman Kusuki.”

Even the sight of the girl in the out-of-place outfit brought no change in the expression on the man she called Kusuki.

“You do not seem surprised, Attack Mage Kisaki.”

“I received word of your arrival.”

“I’m pleased to have gained such a capable partner. What is the status of the Serpent?”

After the girl gave a businesslike reply, Kusuki looked back at her with a faintly amused smile.

Kazuomi Kusuki, founder of Kusuki-Elysée, was known as a man of tremendous capability. Though some criticized him for treating his company

employees as disposable tools, he handed prized postings out to capable subordinates without regard to age or career history. From such a man's point of view, there was no reason to care about the age or gender of one's business partners.

The black-haired girl operated the panel at her fingertips, bringing up a map on the office room's monitor. It displayed the topography of the ocean floor over a wide area, with Itogami Island at the center.

There was a red indicator flashing in and out on the lower right section of the map. It was drawing closer to Itogami Island, but at a pace so slow that one could almost miss it.

"Based on the tracking beacon on the sunken *Isrus*, it is still drifting over a dragon line, approaching from east-southeast. We estimate it will arrive just off Itogami Island sometime between tomorrow afternoon and early morning of the day after."

"Is that so. According to plan, more or less," Kusuki said with a nod. However, his look of satisfaction immediately grew clouded.

Kusuki's eyes were fixed upon an old stone statue placed atop the office room desk—a statue of a goddess bearing owl wings.

"So Her vessel has not yet returned?"

Kusuki asked in a voice that included a faint whiff of irritation.

"You need not be concerned—it is inevitable that She shall return of Her own will."

The black-haired girl gave an unconcerned reply. But Kusuki seemed displeased as he shook his head.

"It is not that I doubt your words, but I am uneasy. If we miss this opportunity, it will be another four years, give or take, until the Serpent returns to Itogami Island, yes? I would prefer to be fully prepared beforehand."

"Understood. In that case, I shall make a minor move of my own."

"I would expect nothing less."

The girl's prompt decision finally made Kusuki's cheeks slacken.

“Incidentally, I heard that someone helped the vessel escape?”

“That is not a concern. We captured a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency during her infiltration of Kusuki-Elysée. Using her as a bargaining chip, we have ensured the government shall not interfere.”

For one brief moment, when she voiced the words *Shamanic War Dancer*, the black-haired girl’s lips formed a smile.

“I see. So you have transformed injury into great success,” Kusuki muttered in an indifferent tone as he turned his eyes to the map of the monitor once more.

His expression had not changed. But the girl gazed at Kusuki with great interest as she said, “You seem to be enjoying this, chairman. Am I mistaken?”

“Of course I enjoy this... I’ve come to the point where the dream I’ve had since I was a little boy is finally within my reach.”

The corners of Kusuki’s lips curled up as he spoke. He stretched a hand toward the map on the monitor, almost as if he was about to grasp hold of the world itself.

The girl unemotionally gazed at his smiling face, one that somehow seemed cruel, and murmured, “I see... A dream, is it?”

The girl, now out of the office room, descended a set of stairs on her way underground.

It was a Spartan corridor of bare concrete. On either side were rows of small rooms with thick, metal doors. These were medical rooms for isolating wounded demon beasts.

However, it was not a demon beast confined in this particular room, but a tall girl with a ponytail.

Sayaka Kirasaka seemed to be sulking as she sat cross-legged on top of a simple, cheap bed, both of her hands still manacled. There were minor scars on her arms and legs, but there were no blatant wounds beyond that. She was simply in a very sour mood.

The black-haired girl operated a digital panel to unlock the door and let herself in.

“—You are awake?”

Then, her brows furrowed as she turned her gaze to the floor. Two men in white gowns were out cold below Sayaka’s bed.

“...And they are?” the girl asked, bewildered.

Sayaka’s lips twisted in visible scorn as she said, “No idea. They probably thought they’d feel me up or something while I was knocked out. This is why I hate men...!”

“I see.” The girl sighed. Apparently, Kusuki-Elysée researchers had found Sayaka while she was asleep and had entered the room without permission. It was her fault for not keeping better watch.

The researchers didn’t know who or what Sayaka Kirasaka was—not for Sayaka’s safety, but for their own.

“...Did you kill them?” the dark-haired girl inquired, crouching down beside the collapsed men.

Sayaka gave a cold shrug of her shoulders. “Of course not. But if you don’t slap a dispel on them soon, it might leave some mental aftereffects.”

“Setting their wicked acts aside, this was most reckless. To think one would attempt to touch a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, an expert in curses and assassination, even while she has lost consciousness—” The girl stopped to sigh.

Excellent priestesses, Shamanic War Dancers were also spell casters and assassins. This remained true even when they were sleeping.

Shamanic War Dancers subconsciously covered themselves in powerful curses as they slept. Anyone touching them with ill intent would find that rebounding upon them, magnified many times over. Only a spell caster of equal or superior rank could touch Sayaka’s body—save perhaps someone for whom Sayaka had opened her heart.

“Looks like you know all about us, Miss Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology. Thanks to that, you had me fooled good.

“Mm-hmm,” continued Sayaka, glaring at the girl with cold eyes full of abuse.

“You’re an Attack Mage manipulating the flow of yin and yang dealing with sorcerous disasters, huh? That’s why you use the Eight Thundergods’ School. Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology and Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency are two peas in a pod, after all.”

“...Yes, I suppose so.”

The girl did not deny Sayaka’s assertion.

Like the Lion King Agency, the Bureau of Astrology was a special government agency. And the girl Sayaka had called Six Blades was a federal Attack Mage, just like Sword Shamans and Shamanic War Dancers.

However, unlike the Lion King Agency’s objective of halting man-made sorcerous disasters and sorcerous terrorism, the Bureau of Astrology’s mission was to prevent naturally occurring sorcerous disasters. To generalize broadly, Sword Shamans were experts in anti-demonic combat, and Six Blades were experts in anti-demon beast combat, to the point that some called them Black Sword Shamans.

“I am Kiriha Kisaki.”

The black-haired girl quietly introduced herself. Then, she pulled out a small remote control and used it to unlock the manacles binding Sayaka.

“I had not intended to deceive you, but I suppose I should apologize to you, Sayaka Kirasaka.”

“...What game are you playing here?”

Sayaka grew suspicious as she rubbed her now-free wrists. Before the doubtful Sayaka, Kiriha tendered a long silver sword—Lustrous Scale.

“I am not your enemy. Surely you have realized it?”

“That you’re working under government orders, too?”

Sayaka grimaced as she accepted the sword, snatching it out of Kiriha’s hand.

Sayaka was under orders to secure and protect Yume, confined by Kusuki-Elysée. But Kiriha had cooperated with Kusuki-Elysée and impeded Sayaka’s mission. If she was acting according to Bureau of Astrology orders, it meant the Bureau of Astrology and the Lion King Agency were completely at odds with

each other.

“In other words, the government is not monolithic in its opinion. One’s goals change according to one’s standpoint, yes?”

That said, Kiriha drew something from the black case she carried over her back. It was a long, slender, metallic weapon. The tip rotated as the sliding handle changed form, turning it into a long spear, near two meters in length. Its tip was split in two to produce a forked spear—

Its beautiful silhouette greatly resembled a tuning fork.

Sayaka glared at Kiriha’s sudden drawing of the weapon and gripped her own sword.

“The upper echelon of the Bureau of Astrology has spoken to the Lion King Agency. When this mission is over, you shall be released. But before that, I shall have you serve as *Her* vessel for but a short time.”

“Her...?”

Ting went the sharp reverberation ringing in Sayaka’s ear, making her expression freeze over. Kiriha’s weapon was no simple spear. It was an amplifier for concentrating and releasing ritual spells.

But this can’t be—! thought Sayaka, bewildered. It was not Kiriha’s ritual energy being released via the forked spear, but rather, something more distant. It was powerful demonic energy, an ancient power, one that probably rivaled a vampire primogenitor’s—

“This power... Don’t tell me it’s...the Witch of the Night?! You’re saying Yume Eguchi is *Her* vessel...?!”

Realizing Kiriha’s true objective, Sayaka swung Lustrous Scale upward.

But that was where Sayaka’s movement came to a halt. The vast demonic energy unleashed by the forked spear had smashed the Shamanic War Dancer’s mental wall, seizing control of Sayaka’s mind. *She* had taken over Sayaka’s physical body.

“Why...are you...doing this...?!”

Amid her paper-thin consciousness, Sayaka desperately wove the words.

Kiriha faintly smiled and shook her head.

“A foolish question, Sayaka Kirasaka. There is but one reason for the Bureau of Astrology to move. We shall protect this nation... No, the world.”

Then, Kiriha quietly lowered her eyes, and murmuring so quietly that only she could hear:

“Even if Itogami Island must sink in the process—”



CHAPTER THREE
LILITH'S AWAKENING

CHAPTER THREE

LILITH'S AWAKENING

1

Kojou awoke to a pain in his back. It was a little before four in the morning. He had a memory of the clock being already an hour past midnight the last time he'd checked, so he'd slept only three hours at most.

It must have been the new moon, for the sky was dark outside the window.

The ceiling was unfamiliar, and the scene around him appeared to be a living room in a small cottage—

Finally, Kojou recalled that he was visiting Blue Elysium.

"I see... Must've fallen asleep..."

Asagi and Nagisa were sandwiching Yukina on the sofa, sleeping shoulder to shoulder. Playing cards were strewn all over the table. The previous night, once fireworks were over, they'd played punishment-game poker with a bizarre level of fanfare, playing until all participants tired themselves and fell asleep.

The battle for top dog was between Yukina, oddly strong at card games, and Asagi, armed with precise calculations and memory ability, with Yaze's show of slipperiness and aloofness making him very competitive. Excepting Yume, who bowed out midway from sleepiness, that left Nagisa, to whom a poker face was a foreign concept, and Kojou, boasting the poorest luck of anyone present, to bear the brunt of the punishment game over and over.

"...Sheesh, even Himeragi's there like that? You'll catch a cold, you know."

Kojou made an exasperated sigh as he looked over the girls, sound asleep on the sofa. It might have been the very first time he'd seen Yukina's unguarded sleeping face like that.

Without makeup, Asagi seemed just a little younger than usual. In contrast, Nagisa looked much more adult when she was asleep. All three were in fairly revealing outfits, but the way they looked so harmonious as they slept felt heartwarming, somehow. Kojou felt a little like a father as he turned the air conditioner up a notch, putting the blanket someone had brought into the living room over them.

“Go back to sleep in bed, maybe,” muttered Kojou with a yawn as he headed toward the boys’ room.

A moment later, he noticed a figure standing in the hallway.

“...Yaze? You awake?”

He must’ve turned out the lights in the living room, thought Kojou as he gazed at the sight of his friend in short trunks. However, Yaze made no reply. Instead, his lips awkwardly trembled as he said:

“...ina...”

“Huh?”

Kojou unwittingly furled his brows at the odd murmur Yaze let slip. With Kojou like that, Yaze took a step toward him, opening both arms wide as he said,

“HIINAAAAAAA!”

“DWAAAAAH!”

Kojou froze and broke out into a hard sweat at Yaze suddenly shouting and going in for a hug.

Yaze’s movements were agile for someone who was clearly sleepwalking. With Kojou unable to move, Yaze circled around him and powerfully embraced him from behind.

If Kojou’s memory served correctly, Hiina was the name of the older girl Yaze had been sweet-talking since way back. Apparently, Yaze had mistaken Kojou for her.

Having him pin me down is bad, thought Kojou, desperately looking to run, but...

“Ha-ha, you’re as cold as a fish, as usual...but I’m not giving up today!”

“Stop talking in your sleep, idiot! Wake up! And hands off!!”

Goose bumps broke out all over Kojou’s body as he shook Yaze off with raw strength. Yaze’s body flew off spectacularly, making a dull *thud* as he crashed into the wall. From there, Yaze slid down to the floor. Apparently, it hurt as much as it looked.

“A-are you all right, Yaze? Sorry. This was totally your fault, though.”

Maybe I overdid it, thought Kojou, becoming concerned as he squatted next to Yaze. However, Yaze didn’t seem to even notice Kojou was there. His lips twisted as he muttered to himself:

“Dammit, nailed me good... Mind control, huh...?”

“What?”

Before the surprised Kojou’s eyes, Yaze tilted forward and collapsed, losing consciousness. A look of anguish came over his face as he slept, seemingly drained of all strength.

“H-hey, Yaze?”

The hell’s goin’ on? thought Kojou, clutching his head in bewilderment. The dimly lit living room returned to tranquility once more. Kojou had lost all urge to sleep, though. The only sound he heard was his own heart, thumping hard in his ears.

He began to hear something else mixed with those annoying heartbeats: the sound of someone’s labored breathing. He heard the continued echoes of faint panting coming from the second floor of the cottage.

“Haah... Haah...”

“Yume?”

Since when has she been there? wondered Kojou as he looked up at Yume in surprise.

The elementary schooler was wearing a summer dress, but she was sitting flat on the stairway’s landing as she continued her ragged breaths. From the look of

her sweat-drenched face, she was desperately holding back something strange that was welling up from inside her body. She resembled Kojou when he was restraining the urge to drink blood.

“No...don’t. Mr. Kojou...stay away!”

“Er, but...”

Even if she begged him, he couldn’t just leave Yume alone when she was obviously in distress, so Kojou set one foot on the stairs. Immediately, the girl’s cheeks twisted in irrepressible fear and shame.

“Nooooo—!”

“Yume...?!”

“Don’t look... Please, don’t look...”

Yume backed away, as if afraid of Kojou’s approach. Lodged between her legs was something like a slender serpent, seeming to twitch around with a mind of its own.

“...N...no...”

Yume’s face paled as she realized Kojou had seen it. The next moment, she pivoted around with unbelievable speed, darting off to the second floor of the cottage.

Left behind, Kojou stood beneath the stairs, dumbfounded.

From the second floor, he heard a voice, laughing as if mocking the whole world. It sounded simultaneously like Yume’s voice yet also like someone completely unfamiliar. That fact unnerved Kojou.

He didn’t know what was happening to her. But Yume was clearly not her normal self. The last words Yaze had murmured—*mind control*—tugged at his thoughts. Then...

“—Senpai.”

Just as Kojou moved to run up the stairs, someone suddenly called to him, stopping him in his tracks. When Kojou looked back, he saw that Yukina was standing there, her aura undetectable.

“Himeragi, you’re awake...?!”

Kojou exhaled in relief. If Yume was the victim of some bizarre phenomenon, it was more than Kojou could handle by himself. He was dealing with a girl at a difficult age, so having Yukina there was immensely reassuring.

“You’re just in the nick of time. Come on, Yume’s acting weird...”

“Yume...you say?” Yukina replied, mystified, as her eyes met Kojou’s.

“Yeah.” Kojou grimaced and nodded. “There’s something growing from her... from right between her legs...!”

“Um, senpai...?”

Yukina sighed with a hint of anger as she shot Kojou a reproachful glare. She had the look of an older girl admonishing an ignorant little boy.

“She may be an elementary schooler, but it would not be strange for Yume’s body to go through certain changes at her age... Well, ah...probably...”

“What are you talking about?! Not *that*, a tail! T-a-i-l!”

“A tail?”

“Yeah.”

Kojou bit his lips as he mulled over the momentary memory burned into his eyes. There was no doubt that the thing poking out from Yume’s skirt had been a tail. It was an animal’s tail, long, black, with a pointy tip—

“It probably wasn’t normal bestialization. I can’t put my finger on it, but something’s different about this.”

Perhaps that tail wasn’t completely physical. With that thought in his mind, Kojou headed up the stairs.

However, before he could finish, he was strongly pulled from behind. It was Yukina, holding tight to Kojou’s clothing.

“Where do you think you’re going, senpai?”

Yukina dragged Kojou down from the stairs and circled around him, seemingly to forbid him to pass. With the only light at her back, Kojou couldn’t read her face. But Yukina gave off an air a bit different from her normal, calm self.

“...Himeragi?”

“Yume this, Yume that... Do you truly like little girls that much?”

Without warning, Yukina closed the distance with Kojou. Her eyes couldn't have been looking up into his from more than two centimeters away. Kojou's voice went shrill as he fell into a panic.

“Huh?! What are you saying, Himeragi? This ain't the time to joke around!”

“Please do not downplay this!”

“Huh? Whaaa—?!”

Am I the bad guy here? anguished Kojou for a moment when Yukina scolded him with a dead-serious look. With Kojou like that, Yukina brought her body right against his.

“I am your watcher, senpai. And yet, you've been paying attention only to Yume and Sayaka, and today, you were with Aiba all day, playing around with just her...”

“...Huh?”

There was a faint whiff of sweet perfume hovering around the freshly woken Yukina. Kojou unwittingly swallowed his saliva at how the thin T-shirt conveyed her soft bounciness underneath.

“So I really am no good for you...? You cannot be satisfied with me...?”

“Er, it's not really a problem of being satisfied or not satisfied...”

Kojou desperately clung to his paper-thin self-control as he pried Yukina's body away from his. That instant, a look of despair welled in Yukina's big eyes.

“So you are dissatisfied, senpai... I see. Then there is nothing I can do as your watcher save kill you and die as well...”

“What...?!”

Yukina gently reached out with her right hand. She retrieved the black case she had brought with her, set against the wall. It held a bodyboard, something that would attract no special attention at a seaside resort.

However, there was no bodyboard inside the case; rather, it contained a

familiar silver spear. Schneewaltzer—a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, said to be able to destroy even a vampire primogenitor.

“I-idiot! You can’t draw out Snowdrift Wolf in a place like this...!”

Kojou backed away, recoiling from having the tip of that familiar spear turned upon him. With things having reached that point, even Kojou realized that Yukina was not in her right mind. It was the same as Yaze just earlier.

He didn’t know the reason why, but their subconscious desires were running rampant. Albeit, it was a bit of a problem if Yukina habitually nursed such destructive thoughts deep down in her heart, but—

“What are you doing, Kojou?”

As Kojou backed off, someone suddenly embraced him from behind. When Kojou looked back into the dim lighting, he could see a girl with an extravagant hairstyle and a thin, frail smile.

“Eh?! A-Asagi?!”

His temples registered a cold sweat.

Of course, with such a ruckus in a living room in the dead of night, it wasn’t strange that she might awaken. What surprised Kojou was the look on Asagi’s face, as if she might break out in tears at any moment.

“So what are you two doing behind my back at an hour like this?” Asagi asked in a faint, trailing voice. Clear droplets fell from her eyes, which were already filled to the brim with tears.

A nonsensical feeling of guilt struck Kojou as he meekly shook his head and said:

“Er, this is... How should I...put this...?”

“Keeping secrets from me and playing hooky with Himeragi again? So you really do like her better...?”

“...Eh?!”

“And I’ve tried so hard... I’ve even done...all kinds of embarrassing things...”

Asagi hugged Kojou from behind with force. Her entire body was trembling as

if she was weeping. *This routine again*, thought Kojou, looking up at the ceiling as he said:

“So even you’re going weird in the head?!”

“What do you mean ‘weird,’ stupid Kojou?! I have insecurities, too... That you’ll leave me here and go somewhere far, far away without saying a word. I’ve felt like that since long before this crazy Fourth Primogenitor thing of yours...!”

“A-Asagi...”

Asagi was weakly pounding on Kojou’s back. Asagi’s and Yukina’s awkwardness hadn’t changed a bit, but in contrast to Yukina’s destructive stalker tendencies, Asagi felt far younger and more timid with her subconscious running amok.

This ain’t the real them, Kojou understood in his head, but he was frozen stiff, unable to just brush them off. With Kojou still, Asagi was about to whisper something into his ear when...

“—That’s enough, Aiba.”

Make your precious confession when in your right mind, the timing seemed to say as Yukina touched her silver spear to Asagi’s neck.

It was a most gentle cut, perhaps not even a full layer of skin. But at that instant, Asagi’s entire body was enveloped in pale sparks, and she convulsed. She collapsed on the spot, and Yukina caught her from the side.

“H-Himeragi...?! ”

“I have released Aiba from the mind control. I believe this will return her to her right mind.”

Yukina spoke in a dead-serious tone. The calm air she gave off, same as usual, made Kojou feel so relieved that he wanted to cry. Yukina seemed to be brooding over something off on her own, but she’d apparently returned to sanity at some point.

“So you girls were being controlled by someone. That’s why you were acting strange, Himeragi?”

“O-of course. Thanks to Snowdrift Wolf, I was somehow able to break free...”

Yukina’s expression was unnaturally strained as she made the assertion with oddly heavy insistence. She was gripping the spear too hard, causing the triple-bladed spear tip to waver a little.

“So those things I said earlier were absolutely not my true feelings, okay? They are not, okay?”

“R-right.”

Kojou nervously nodded, hard-pressed by her intimidating look. He didn’t know what other response to offer. In the meantime, he gave Yukina a helping hand laying the unconscious Asagi down on the sofa.

Off in the faint darkness, Kojou felt like he heard someone squirm around and rise up. “Oh, come on,” he moaned, having a vague sense of what was coming next.

“Ko...jou...”

As he covered his eyes in exasperation, Nagisa embraced him.

He felt like the aura she gave off was somehow different than normal, but at the same time, it wasn’t all that unusual, either. “You too, huh?” he said, making a heavy, listless sigh.

“Hey, Kojou... Actually, I...”

“Himeragi, please.”

“...Yes.”

Kojou interrupted Nagisa’s words and swiftly held her down. Yukina put her right hand directly in front of Nagisa’s nose. Without fanfare, the snap of Yukina’s fingers made all the strength drain from Nagisa’s body; perhaps it was a type of hypnosis. Nagisa, falling limp onto the sofa, began making sleeping sounds once more.

The fact that she hadn’t used Snowdrift Wolf, like in Asagi’s case, might have been from judging there wasn’t the same urgency, or perhaps consideration for Nagisa’s lack of physical endurance; one of the two—or perhaps both.

When Nagisa calmed down, Kojou finally managed to recover from the mayhem. He didn't know what had caused them to run amok, but there seemed no problem in leaving them there for the time being. The higher priority, one that couldn't wait, was dealing with Yume.

With that thought, Kojou looked up at the stairs once more. The next moment, an amused, laughing voice poured down from overhead.

2

A young girl's face poked up from the stairwell's railing.

She had big eyes and soft, distinctive hair that reached her shoulders, characteristics of Yume that Kojou and Yukina knew well. However, this particular smile on her face gave off a very different impression than the normal Yume did.

It was an expression filled with malice, as if to mock the surprised pair.

"Whaaa? Booring. After I went through the trouble of having them say their real feelings and everything..."

She spoke in a breathy voice, shrugging her shoulders in visible disappointment. Her lips remained tapered in a pout as she looked between Yukina and Kojou.

"Big Sis over there got back to normal with the power of that weird spear, but who exactly could you be to resist my mind control, Big Bro? You're no ordinary demon, huh. I mean, Kiriha said I could control Levia and everything."

"...Levia?" Yukina murmured, brows furrowed.

Kojou was beside himself as he examined the girl.

The girl standing in the stairway didn't just have a different expression; her voice and diction seemed like a completely different person. She appeared to have even forgotten Kojou's and Yukina's names.

"You're...not Yume. Who are you?"

"Hey, I'm Yume, too. Yume seems to call me Riru, though."

“...Riru?!”

Kojou took in a sharp breath. He remembered hearing that name—the name of Yume’s “older sister,” the other girl supposedly held captive by Kusuki-Elysée, along with Yume.

But that very Riru was using Yume’s body to laugh right before Kojou’s and Yukina’s eyes.

“Could this be...dissociative identity disorder...?” Yukina murmured, watching the girl calling herself Riru. She apparently had some idea why Yume had undergone the sudden change.

But Riru’s eyes narrowed in amusement. “Tee-hee, you mean multiple personalities? So Yume created another personality to protect her mind from all of her nasty experiences? I suppose that’s not exactly true, but not exactly far off, either.”

Riru laughed derisively while speaking like it didn’t concern her. Kojou felt himself getting annoyed by Riru’s words.

“Nasty experiences... You mean the kidnapping?”

“Kidnapping? Oh no, not like that,” Riru said. “How’d you get that idea?” She clutched her belly as she laughed. “Yume’s been bullied since way back—by the students at her school and by her own parents. Yume was all alone when Kusuki-Elysée took her in, so it’s, like, her benefactor?”

“Bullied...why?”

“Ehh... Well, isn’t it obvious...? Because Yume’s a succubus.”

Riru readily answered Kojou’s question. In spite of her unenthusiastic confession, Kojou couldn’t understand the meaning of her words.

“Succubus...you say?”

“Yes. Succubus. A rare species of demon, but y’know what they are, right? They use mind-control techniques to get in other people’s heads and manipulate them as they please, stimulating their lusts and stuff. It’s embarrassing to be an *ecchi* kid like that. So everyone hates them and stuff... Well, I’m talking like it’s not my problem, tee-hee.”

Riru curled up the corners of her lips, seemingly at her own expense. Somehow, the expression seemed equally like a tearful one.

“Yume didn’t wanna accept that part of her, so she made me, cutting herself off from a succubus’s lusts and abilities. Totally not fair. She pushes all the bad stuff onto someone else, so she can stay all pure by herself. Sheesh, Yume, you are such a downer! And you’ve got this awesome thing growing from you and stuff.”

From under the hem of the summer dress she wore, a slender black tail was swaying to and fro. It was a bestial tail of solidified demonic energy. It provided eloquent proof of Yume’s true nature.

“So Yume’s an unregistered demon, too...,” Kojou murmured in a low, subdued voice.

He didn’t know just how scarce succubi were. But Kusuki-Elysée confining the girl made no sense if Yume was just an ordinary little girl.

“That’s riiight. Tee-hee, so now you hate Yume, too, don’t you, Big Bro?”

Riru spoke with a tone that conveyed an odd display of sex appeal one wouldn’t expect from an elementary schooler. Kojou glared up at her, cursing under his breath, unamused.

“No way in hell.”

“...Ahh?”

“Yume’s a succubus? Well, I’m a vampire. If you’re gonna talk about pretty indecent stuff, I’ve even drank the blood of Himeragi and other girls. And having a tail on you like that is kinda cute, ain’t it?”

Hearing Kojou’s words, Riru’s smile vanished.

Her young lips twisted in dismay.

“Hmm, you’re a good egg, Big Bro. You’re just, you know, one of *those*—a hypocrite, or into mutual pity...or maybe, a lolicon?”

“Who is?!!”

“Well, if you’re gonna be like that, maybe I’d better do what Kiriha asked me

to.”

Riru’s eyebrows rose malevolently as she leaped over the stairway’s railing. The back of her summer dress ripped apart as wings sprouted from her back. The wings were half-solid, formed of demonic energy.

With a flap of those wings, Riru landed behind Kojou and Yukina without a sound. Then, she opened a glass window and flew right out of the cottage, all in the span of an instant without any time to stop her.

“Yume, wait...!”

Kojou headed outside after her. Riru was standing barefoot on the grass in the yard.

But the instant Kojou tried to sprint toward her, a silver beam came rushing toward him out of the corner of his vision. It was an owl with metal wings. Kojou stopped dead in his tracks just as it darted by, barely grazing him and gouging a deep tear in his T-shirt at chest height.

“Senpai! Get down!”

The owl was whirling around in midair to attack Kojou again when Yukina intercepted it with her spear. With a ferocious outpouring of sparks, the owl lost one of its wings and proceeded to crash to earth. It transformed into a thin sheet of metal, moving no more.

“What’s with that thing...?!”

“A *shikigami*. But this ritual is...”

A grave look came over Yukina as she gazed down at the metal sheet at her feet.

Kojou guardedly looked around the area.

The *shikigami* had gone for Kojou when he’d tried to stop Riru. The timing of the attack was oddly precise. Considering the situation, it had to be someone from Kusuki-Elysée there to take Yume back.

As if to buttress Kojou’s deduction, Riru, standing in the darkness, let out a cry of delight.

“So you came for me, Kiriha. I’m baaack!”

A black-haired girl in a high school uniform had arrived. She waited at a parked car on the street right in front of the cottage as Riru rushed over to her.

She had a symmetrical face and a physique that was at once elegant, yet also felt supple and tenacious. She was carrying a black case for a tripod over her back.

Somehow, she seems a lot like Yukina, thought Kojou.

“Welcome back, Riru. Your mood seems to have brightened somewhat?”

“Guess so.”

Riru pranced around the black-haired girl, laughing boisterously.

Kojou and Yukina stopped in their steps, bewildered as they faced off against the black-haired girl. They hadn’t expected the person dispatched by Kusuki-Elysée to be a high school girl.

“...You’re this ‘Kiriha’?”

“Yes, Kiriha Kisaki. It is a pleasure to meet you, Fourth Primogenitor. The girl behind you should understand the meaning of the words *Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology*.”

The girl calling herself Kiriha calmly looked back at Kojou as she spoke.

Kojou was a bit thrown off that she knew all about him. However, Yukina was more surprised than he. Yukina’s eyes widened, almost as if she could not believe what she saw, making no movement, seemingly frozen in place.

“...Why is the Bureau of Astrology interfering with Sayaka’s mission...?!”

“There was a minor difference in political policy, nothing more. I seek no conflict with you...personally, at least.”

“—?!”

Before Kiriha had even finished, Kojou sustained a blow from the side that sent him tumbling to the ground.

It was Yukina who had thrust Kojou away as he stood rooted in a daze.

An arrow from a Western-style bow grazed the place where Kojou had stood until the very moment before. If he'd remained there, the arrow would doubtlessly have completely shot through his torso.

Still on the ground, Kojou looked up, shifting his gaze in the direction from which the arrow had been sent flying. Then, he gawked with a low groan.

There was a tall, slender girl wielding a silver recurve bow in apparent defense of Riru and Kiriha. She had long hair drawn up into a ponytail that danced in the pre-dawn darkness.

“Kirasaka...why the hell are you...?”

Kojou moaned in utter shock, still staring at Sayaka Kirasaka as she nocked a new arrow onto her recurve bow.

Sayaka had sent bloodlust Kojou's way a fair number of times. But this was the first time she, with her deep love of Yukina, had attacked Kojou when that same Yukina might be put in the crossfire.

That was enough for him to judge that Sayaka wasn't in her right mind, either.

“Sayaka?!” Yukina exclaimed, letting her spear drop.

However, there was no change in expression from the girl holding the bow. All that came from her was a cold, mechanical gaze as she emotionlessly surveyed Kojou and Yukina.

3

“—Let us be off, Riru. Chairman Kusuki is waiting.”

Turning her back to Kojou and Yukina, who were unable to move, Kiriha Kisaki walked forward. The car waiting for her and Riru belonged to the Kusuki-Elysée company.

Kojou and Yukina simply stared, dumbfounded.

If Kiriha was dragging Riru off by force, they probably could have gotten in the way. However, Kiriha had done nothing. Riru was going off with Kiriha of her own will, and Sayaka, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, obstructed

their path.

If Riru—no, Yume Eguchi—was taken away just like that, Kojou and Yukina would have no just cause under which to get her back. Everything was going according to how Kiriha and her people wished.

“Himeragi, can I leave Yume to you? I’ll manage with Kirasaka somehow.”

“Senpai?”

With Kojou addressing her in a quiet voice, Yukina looked at him, her eyes wavering with visible unease.

“But, senpai. Right now, Sayaka is not—”

“I know. That mind-control stuff, right? Looks like a worse case than you had earlier. Geez, how’d this happen? She was supposed to be off dealing with Riru.”

“Yes. But here, I really should be the one to—”

“No way, Himeragi.” Kojou checked Yukina with a strong tone.

Certainly, if the objective was defeating Sayaka, relying on Yukina’s power was the safer bet. Yukina’s Snowdrift Wolf could cancel out the vile ability of Sayaka’s Lustrous Scale—its pseudo-spatial severing. She also knew what was in Sayaka’s Shamanic War Dancer arsenal. But...

“Look, just go! Kirasaka’ll feel terrible when she’s sane again if she finds out she tried to kill you!”

“—Understood. Senpai, please be careful. If she was fighting seriously, even I might only manage to defeat Sayaka one out of five times.”

“Eh...?!”

With Yukina having left behind that incredible statement, Kojou’s face twitched as he watched her run off. Maybe he’d have been better off not hearing that nugget of information, especially with that timing.

Now that he thought of it, Yukina was really still an apprentice, whereas Sayaka was a full Shamanic War Dancer. Sayaka had to have far more actual combat experience, too. On top of that, unlike Yukina, a poor spell caster,

Sayaka was a skilled user of a wealth of spells. The saving grace was that she had no Snowdrift Wolf with which to nullify Kojou's demonic energy...

"But that bow was pretty nasty stuff, wasn't it...?"

As if reading Kojou's mind, Sayaka fired a cursed arrow.

The arrow sailed toward the heavens as it whistled, the great reverberation creating a high-density spell. A giant magic circle unfolded, with the thunderbolts it created pouring down on Kojou with pinpoint accuracy.

"Aww, crap! C'mon over, Regulus Aurum!"

Kojou summoned his Beast Vassal without hesitation. The lightning lion, enveloped by vast demonic power, collided with the pouring thunderbolts, canceling out Sayaka's tremendous attack.

The clash of enormous magical energies sent a disquieting tremor throughout the entire subfloat. Kojou and the others felt static electricity in the air pricking their flesh as lampposts burned out in dazzling flashes of light.

"Not holding back, are you?!"

Kojou was petrified, overwhelmed by the absurd might of Sayaka's attack. Because it was Regulus Aurum, he was somehow able to fend off the blow, but an ordinary vampire's Beast Vassal would doubtlessly have been blown away in that single strike. It was a spell on an extraordinary scale for a mere human being to wield single-handedly.

Now that he thought of it, Sayaka had been assigned as Dimitrie Vattler's observer. In other words, even that combat-maniac vampire recognized the strength of her abilities. Perhaps Sayaka, fighting seriously, would prove a far more difficult foe than Kojou had imagined.

Sayaka, realizing that her curse arrow had been blocked, rushed to her next move.

"Kojou Akatsuki!!"

"—Whoa?!"

The downward swing of the long sword grazed past the tip of Kojou's nose as he evaded it by a paper's breadth. Even with Kojou's vampirism-enhanced

reaction speed, it seemed practically a miracle that he'd escaped such a terrifying slicing blow.

“Are you an ogre?! Take it a little easy on the amateur, sheesh!”

Kojou released his Beast Vassal from its summons and ran for the hills with all his might. Either way, Kojou's Beast Vassals were too powerful to use with Sayaka as the opponent. After all, clumsily unleashing one with Sayaka at such close range would catch Kojou in the lethal strike, to say nothing of blowing Sayaka away without a trace.

That said, vampires unable to use their Beast Vassals were comparatively frail as demons went. Against an ultra-high end Attack Mage like Sayaka, running for it was all Kojou could think of.

Apparently, he couldn't hope for anything convenient like the mind control leaving Sayaka a smidgeon of sanity, prompting her to take it easy on him.

“Shit... Was I too hasty?”

He couldn't help but regret having sent Yukina on ahead. Even if he'd known from the start, Kojou stopping Sayaka on his own was far too much to ask.

First of all, he didn't think even Yukina would be able to easily take her out of action. It wasn't like when she'd put Asagi and Nagisa out cold. What was spurring Sayaka into action was not incomplete mind control making her hidden desires run wild. She was completely controlled, and seriously trying to kill Kojou.

He didn't know how such powerful mind control was possible without leaning on Riru's power. However, that didn't mean he was out of options, either. Even if he didn't understand the root cause, even Kojou could come up with at least one way to break the mind control over Sayaka. A method only possible for a vampire like Kojou—

“So the gist is, override what's controlling her with even stronger demonic energy!”

The problem being whether I can actually do it or not, thought Kojou, biting his lip.

There were a number of hurdles Kojou had to vault over in order to bring that plan to fruition. Breaking through the first checkpoint was a tall order in a situation where he was constantly under attack.

With terrifying speed, Sayaka thrust her sword forward, grazing Kojou's cheek.

Even if he used something to block her attacks, it was impossible to fend off the blade while the spatial-severing effect enveloped it. He needed a way to deal with that and to release Sayaka from mind control at the same time—

“This is gonna be a little rough, but I guess I'll give it a shot...”

Kojou's murmur seemed to put him back on his feet with a bold smile. In the back of his mind, he thought back to the trivial conversation he'd had with Yukina back at the pool; namely, how Sayaka and water didn't mix—

“C'mon over, Natra Cinereus!”

Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal—a faithful beast serving from within a vampire's own blood. The fourth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, Avrora Florestina, was a giant, hard-shelled beast surrounded by mist.

“—?!”

Sayaka's face froze stiff when she realized she'd lost her sense of solid ground.

Natra Cinereus was a Beast Vassal epitomizing the vampiric ability of mist. However, its effective range was not limited to Kojou, its host; it was able to weaken the binding forces of solid matter, turning any and every kind of object into mist. It was destruction and calamity incarnate, worthy of its title as a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Of course, he could not use such a dangerous power on Sayaka herself. Kojou's target was not Sayaka, but rather, the ground at her feet.

Sayaka was standing on a subfloat built out of resin and metal. If that artificial soil were to vanish, there was nothing beneath it—except the sea.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

Enveloped by silver mist, Sayaka fell from the pull of gravity.

It was probably six or seven meters before she hit the water. With an unexpectedly cute cry, Sayaka plunged in, kicking up a spectacular splash.

“Er, this ain’t good?!”

The attack by the overly powerful Beast Vassal had “worked,” but, of course, things had not ended there. The incredibly powerful mist spread farther, gouging a giant hole in the artificial ground tens of meters in radius. The foundation supporting the subfloat, the decorative soil packed atop it, and the trees and lampposts on top of that, were completely annihilated.

Having lost its support, the roadway collapsed, with pieces falling into the sea one after another.

“Shit... I overdid it... *Koff!*”

Kojou, crouched down on the tilting ground surface, coughed as seawater showered down on him from above. The Beast Vassal had blithely involved its host, Kojou, in the overpowering destruction it had wrought.

The place that was once the cottage’s lawn had been nicely gouged out, creating a bowl-shaped inlet in its place. Perhaps he ought to have blessed his good fortune that the surrounding buildings had not sunk into the sea as well.

“—Where’s Kirasaka?!”

Kojou released the Beast Vassal from its summons and looked around the area.

The next moment, he looked back, sensing bloodlust behind him. Sayaka, having just crawled out of the sea, was launching a downward swing at Kojou that very moment.

However, Sayaka’s attack did not have the same speed as before. The soaking-wet clothing she wore was robbing her of her sharpness of motion. Kojou had tentatively succeeded in his aim. Beyond that...

“Whoa... That’s...!”

Kojou unwittingly drew his breath in as he looked up at Sayaka, sword poised high.

Sayaka had stripped off the waterlogged vest of her uniform, perhaps judging

that it was in the way of her movements. The white school shirt she'd worn beneath it was completely drenched, too. With the fabric transparent and clinging to her flesh, her pale skin and cutely designed bra were exposed to his nocturnal eyes.

The spectacle was all the more devastating because Sayaka was so amazingly stylish to begin with. As she swung her sword around, the contrast between her see-through shirt and bouncing breasts stole Kojou's vision.

He maintained his distance with Sayaka as he shifted deeper and deeper into the water. Pursuing him, she was in the sea once more.

The surface of the water was already up to their hips. In that condition, Sayaka could no longer swing her sword, for if the space-ripping effect Lustrous Scale gave off hit the water, its wielder, Sayaka, would not escape unscathed. Accordingly, thrusting became her only option for attack.

Knowing this, Kojou had his own card to play.

"Kirasaka...don't blame me for this!"

Kojou kicked off from the bottom of the water, making full use of his vampiric strength. In an instant, he closed a distance of some four or five meters, rushing Sayaka straight from the front.

"Kojou Akatsuki...!"

Sayaka's reaction was quick. Easily tracking Kojou's movement, she raised her long sword and thrust forward.

Kojou did not evade. Adding a footstep to accelerate farther, he impaled himself on the tip of her sword.

Kojou's unanticipated action threw Sayaka's aim off just a little. The sword that should have run him through the heart instead impaled Kojou through the gut and out his back.

"Guoaaaa!"

Kojou let out a cry from his mouth. The pain alone could kill him. But he'd resigned himself to that from the beginning.

With Sayaka running Kojou through to the hilt, she could not draw her sword

out of him. And Kojou could still move.

Before his eyes, Sayaka was frozen in shock. Kojou's hand extended and touched her collar.

Her pale neck was drenched with sweat and seawater. Her slender collarbone was poking up from under the drenched shirt. She had such a refined face that it could draw you in before you knew it, and deep cleavage between her breasts that did not suit such a slender physique—

Even while fighting for his life, it was more than enough to stimulate his lust. Furthermore, it was sexual desire that was the root of a vampire's urge to drink blood—

“Wha—?!”

Kojou yanked Sayaka close by her shirt collar. Kojou's fangs thrust into her now-exposed flesh.

“—?!”

Sayaka's face twisted in pain. Kojou paid no heed as he sipped on her blood.

Legend had it that a vampire could control a human being just from drinking a person's blood. Unfortunately, Kojou could not do anything that artful, but at the very least, he could inject the powerful demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor. Surely it would be enough to cause the mind control cast upon Sayaka to wither away.

But before the mind control lifted completely, Sayaka retrieved a silver dart from under her skirt. She twisted it around in her hand, aiming the sharp tip at the back of Kojou's head.

Even a vampire would go down in one shot if you impaled the cerebellum with such a thing. However, Sayaka was swinging that vile implement down when her hand stopped midway. A split-second prior, as if defying the mind control with her own will, the dart slipped from her hand as she settled against Kojou.

“Ah...”

A sweet sigh escaped Sayaka's lips.

Kojou felt her softness and warmth as he held up her relaxed body.

At some point, the sky had begun to brighten.

The light of the quietly burning morning sky silently shone upon their bloodstained embrace.

4

The pre-twilight atmosphere was charged with lingering magical energy.

They were the remnants of the lightning attack unleashed by Sayaka, and of Kojou summoning his Beast Vassal to block it.

The Kusuki-Elysée company car was parked on a coastal road a small distance from the cottage. The automated driving system it was equipped with had made an emergency stop when it detected lightning strikes. Kiriha Kisaki was getting Riru out of the getaway car. No doubt, they were giving up on moving by car and planned to return to Kusuki-Elysée on foot.

But before she could lead Riru away by hand, Kiriha stood still and raised her head up. Her gaze shifted until it met Yukina, standing with her silver spear poised.

With a glare, Yukina stated, “I want you to give Yume back.”

“Wow.” Riru looked up at Kiriha in amusement.

Kiriha shook her head with a sigh and drew her spear from the case over her back. It was a silver, forked spear, with its tip split into two tines.

“Do you not understand, Yukina Himeragi? You have no reason to bring Riru back with you,” Kiriha said quietly.

It was Yukina’s duty as Sword Shaman to watch the Fourth Primogenitor—Kojou Akatsuki. No matter who Yume Eguchi was, that gave Yukina no right to take her back. But...

“I believe that brainwashing Sayaka to attack Akatsuki-senpai is reason enough to view you as my enemy?” Yukina calmly rebutted her.

Kiriha had indirectly attempted to harm Kojou, her observation target. It was

sophistry, but it surely amounted to *casus belli* for Yukina to do battle with Kiriha.

“I did not wish for Riru to come into contact with the Fourth Primogenitor. He is a wild card and simply too dangerous, you see.”

Kiriha shook her head with dismay as she replied.

The next moment, they heard a giant explosive sound behind her. A silver mist resembling gunsmoke rose into the pre-dawn sky. Kojou had used one of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals.

“You do not need to go see how he is faring?”

Kiriha seemed to be teasing her with that question. However, Yukina shook her head, her expression unmoved.

“Sayaka will be all right. Senpai, too, probably.”

“...You trust the Fourth Primogenitor, then? Somewhat unexpected.”

Kiriha suspiciously raised an eyebrow. Then, she shook her head, as if to say *I misspoke*.

“Ah, please do not misunderstand... I have no interest in the Fourth Primogenitor. I am aware that you are watching him, and have no intention of interfering. It is not I who involved the Fourth Primogenitor in this, but Sayaka Kirasaka.”

“What do you intend to do with Yume once you bring her back to Kusuki-Elysée? Why is the Bureau of Astrology assisting them?”

Yukina asked, disregarding Kiriha’s excuses.

Like the Lion King Agency, the Bureau of Astrology was a special department under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Its involvement in the present incident would explain why the Lion King Agency could not act overtly to keep Yume safe. The Bureau of Astrology was probably exerting pressure on the government to keep the Lion King Agency at bay.

“Tee-hee,” laughed Kiriha, looking sure of victory as she smiled. “Kusuki-Elysée is Yume Eguchi’s legal guardian. Furthermore, she is returning of her own will. Even the Lion King Agency has no right to stop me.”

With Kiriha like that, Yukina made a small nod, seemingly yielding to her words as she said, “I suppose so, if Yume truly does desire that. However—!”

“Uu?!”

Without warning, Yukina kicked off from the ground, slamming her spear toward Kiriha. Instantly, the forked spear parried the blow as Kiriha cursed under her breath; for she realized that Yukina’s target had not been Kiriha, but rather, the spear she wielded.

Yukina’s spear gave off a pale glow as it collided with Kiriha’s forked weapon. This was the purifying light of the Divine Oscillation Effect—able to nullify all magical energy and rend any barrier. *Ting* went the violent, ear-piercing sound scattered about as the magical energy around the forked spear vanished.

“The Lion King Agency’s Schneewaltzer. A troublesome armament indeed...” Kiriha smiled ferociously as she forced the overbearing Yukina backward. “... When did you notice this spear’s true nature?”

“From the beginning. After all, for you to appear just after the Riru personality awakened was too timely to be a coincidence.”

Having landed, Yukina looked at Kiriha and poised her spear once more.

The Riru personality sleeping inside Yume had suddenly awoken in the dead of night. A different personality had been triggered, yet there had been no stimulus or experience to cause it to do so. Consequently, there was but one possibility she could think of—

Someone had controlled Yume’s mind from the outside and forced Riru to awaken.

“The Ricercare of the Bureau of Astrology... That spear’s ability is what awakened the Riru personality and planted suggestions into Sayaka, yes?”

Yukina glared coldly at Kiriha’s spear as she spoke the words.

Ricercare: an exorcism weapon constructed via a different method than what the Lion King Agency used. Its ability was to amplify accumulated demonic energy and release it according to the wielder’s will.

Through the use of the forked spear, the wielder was able to employ special

abilities supposedly beyond human means and manipulate vast demonic energies. Ricercare could be described as a weapon that copied magical and demonic energy.

“So you drew Riru’s—no, Yume’s succubus demonic energy into the spear. You employed that ability in reverse to make Yume awaken as Riru.”

“Correct. Though I never imagined I would see all the demonic energy I drew wiped away quite like this...,” Kiriha said, although in a thoroughly unapologetic tone.

To Ricercare (able to manipulate demonic energy), Yukina’s Snowdrift Wolf (able to nullify demonic energy) was its mortal foe. The loss of accumulated demonic energy had already torn Kiriha’s spell apart.

“Yukina—?!”

Yume, having returned to her proper personality, called out to Yukina with a plaintive cry. That she wasn’t all that surprised to see Yukina wielding the spear might have meant she had some memory of what had transpired during her time as Riru.

Either way, the situation had changed. *This* Yume did not wish to return to Kusuki-Elysée. If, in spite of that, Kiriha dragged Yume off by force, she was a mere kidnapper. Yukina could save Yume regardless of her Lion King Agency assignment.

“Now I have a reason to stop you. Or shall you simply withdraw, Six Blades?”

Yukina duly warned Kiriha. Surely, even Kiriha understood they had traded places. If Kiriha remained any longer, the prestige of the Bureau of Astrology would be on the line.

Even so, Kiriha twirled her spear with nothing more than a swish and said, “It was my honest hope that we would get along, but you leave me no choice... This violates our understanding with the Lion King Agency, but I’m sure they’ll overlook it as exigent circumstances—!”

“—!”

The forked spear became a typhoon that stopped Yukina’s silver spear cold.

Kiriha's spear was no longer charged with demonic energy, but it had not lost any of its functionality as a weapon in the process. Furthermore, Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf could not employ its special effect against attacks that lacked demonic energy. The two were on equal terms.

"If you thought sealing Ricercare's ability was enough to win, you're naive!"



“...Urk!”

Kiriha’s incredible flurry of attacks forced Yukina on the defensive. Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency and Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology came from shared roots. The techniques used by both were very similar.

Thus, it was the difference in the wielders’ skills that determined who had the upper hand.

Even if she was talented, Yukina was critically short on combat experience. Nor could she deny that she was at a physical disadvantage. Each and every attack from a Priestess of the Six Blades, experts in anti–demon beast combat, was a swift, heavy blow. Yukina’s small physique could be easily knocked around even while guarding.

However, it was not Yukina who appeared nervous but Kiriha, the attacker.

Kiriha’s lethal attacks weren’t hitting Yukina.

Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency were able to peer a brief moment into the future. The same went for Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology. However, Yukina was the one reading Kiriha’s moves first.

Yukina’s spirit sight was well beyond Kiriha’s.

“I should have expected this from the individual the Lion King Agency chose to watch the Fourth Primogenitor... I had thought you a little milk-drinking child with good looks as a redeeming feature, but this... Tee-hee, this makes it worthwhile—!”

Kiriha laughed ferociously. Her refined facade fell away, fully exposing the real her: sadistic and belligerent.

“Raw Lightning—!”

Kiriha knocked Yukina off balance with a single brute-force attack, following up with a stern knee strike. It was a blunt attack technique infused with ritual energy for anti–demon beast combat. Being struck by such a blow would invariably destroy the internal organs of any normal human.

But Yukina evaded that merciless attack and slipped into Kiriha’s flank in turn.

“Distort!”

Yukina unleashed an eviscerating attack from point-blank range. Kiriha instantly sailed backward, parrying the shock of the blow.

“Mist Lynx—Twin Moons!”

As Kiriha thrust her Ricercare, its twin blades resonated, scattering destructive sonic waves all about. The magic energy–amplifying staff boosted Kiriha’s ritual energy, enabling her to let loose with a powerful offensive ritual spell.

“—?!”

“Yukina—?!”

Yume yelled at the top of her lungs as she saw Yukina engulfed by the destructive sonic wave. However, Yukina did not falter. The glow emitted by the silver spear she wielded created ritual energy that sliced the destructive sonic wave asunder. Then:

“Snowdrift Wolf!”

Yukina thrust her spear, tracing an upward spiral as it knocked Kiriha’s forked spear away.

Kiriha retreated in annoyance after having her ritual energy sheared away. She coughed violently, sending blood trickling from her lips. She had been unable to fully neuter the might of Yukina’s close-range blow.

“Blood... My blood...”

Kiriha violently wiped her wet lips with her palm, heaving in visible excitement. Her eyes bore a look bordering on intoxication as they gazed at her scarlet-dyed palm.

“As I might have expected, I am at a disadvantage in anti-personal combat. I did not think dueling with a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency would prove so...stimulating. Such a waste that our time is up. Do you not think so?”

“Time is up...?”

Yukina felt somewhat thrown off by Kiriha’s words. But her face was

illuminated by a dazzling glow. Beyond the road, the water's horizon was dyed white by the reflection of the morning sun. Dawn had broken.

Kiriha lowered her spear, apparently having lost the will to fight.

The next moment, Subfloat Blue Elysium was assailed by an explosive demonic energy wave, enough to make the very ground shake.

“—?!”

Yukina fell to her knees, unable to withstand the excessive shock wave. It was the same as Yukina had sensed in Demon Beast Park the day before. But compared to that, the density of the demonic energy had risen.

“This wave... What in the world is...?!”

Yukina gazed at the sea in surprise. The source of the demonic energy wave was at the bottom of the sea. A vast amount of it was being indiscriminately emitted somewhere beneath the waves, far from Blue Elysium.

If Yukina had been better versed in military affairs, she might have realized that the demonic energy pulse resembled the active sonar of a military submarine, and that something lurking in the deep sea was emitting a demonic energy wave like a sensor to discern its enemy's location—

“Shadow of mine, mist yet not mist, blade but not blade—! As the slicing dream, let play the instrument of destruction!”

With Yukina distracted by the demonic energy pulse, Kiriha seized the momentary opening and chanted an incantation. Her Ricercare amplified the vast magical energy flowing out of her to form a blade of sonic waves.

Yukina immediately moved to raise Snowdrift Wolf, but it was too late. Before Yukina could ready herself, Kiriha's attack came, mowing her down. The blade's shock wave carved through the air.

Yukina had not defended in time. Yet, it was not Yukina who made a low groan of surprise, but Kiriha, who had launched the attack.

“Yu...me...?”

“Riru?”

The pair simultaneously addressed the girl by two different names.

Kiriha's attack had been blocked by a pair of black wings, seemingly deployed to shield Yukina. They were shadowy wings woven from demonic energy, and it had been Yume who had spread them. It had been she, not Riru, drawing out her own succubus power, protecting Yukina out of her own free will.

"Please, stop this. Kiriha, Yukina, both of you—"

Yume made a lonely smile as she pressed down on the collar of her torn summer dress. Then she turned her back on both Yukina and Kiriha, shifting her eyes toward Blue Elysium.

Under the dawn sky, on the other side of the inlet, she could make out Demon Beast Park—site of the Kusuki-Elysée laboratory.

"It doesn't matter anymore... I'm...going to end it all, so..."

Yume then flapped her wings. Without a sound, her diminutive body soared into the sky, seeming to glide as she flew away.

"...Yume... Why?!"

Yukina, instantly left behind, did not understand what had just happened. Why would Yume, purportedly running from Kusuki-Elysée, suddenly have a change of heart? And what was that demonic energy pulse emitted from the bottom of the sea—?

For some reason, a small, impetuous smile came over Kiriha, surely aware of those answers as she looked up at the sky and watched Yume fly off.

Both Yukina and Kiriha kept up their guard, but both had already lost all reason to fight.

Yume, after all, was gone.

"Asagi...Aiba..."

Lowering her forked spear, Kiriha murmured while shifting her gaze to the area behind Yukina. Yukina, hearing footsteps approaching, looked over her shoulder as well. Asagi was running toward them, wearing sandals and breathing heavily. Asagi, having regained consciousness back at the cottage, realized that Kojou and Yukina were absent and had come looking for them.

“—Himeragi, what happened? Where’s Yume?”

“Aiba, don’t! Do not come near!”

Yukina shouted, wary of how Kiriha might act. Asagi stopped, surprised by her voice.

However, all Kiriha did was glance unamused in Asagi’s direction. The only emotions her eyes held toward Asagi were pity and disdain.

“I see...you are...the Priestess of Cain...”

“Who the hell are you...?”

With Kiriha sending her a gaze resembling outright hatred, Asagi glared right back in visible displeasure. Kiriha was strongly gripping her spear, seemingly with bloodlust coursing through her, but she immediately thought wiser of it and shook her head as she said:

“It was...illogical of me to reproach you. But I am sorry. Do not think less of me for it—”

As an afterthought, she added, “Farewell,” and turned her back to Yukina and Asagi.

Without another word, Kiriha departed.

There was nothing Yukina could do but watch.

5

The place that had once been the cottage’s yard had been transformed into a tragic sight.

The ground had caved in, almost as if a giant scoop had gouged a hole in it. The now-exposed structural supports of the artificial isle were submerged in seawater. Rubber chips spread over the road and even the guardrails had been blown away without a trace. Waves washed against the green grass, tilted at an angle.

Yukina instinctively knew who was responsible. Kojou had used a Beast Vassal. *Why did he need to unleash such incredible destruction just to release*

Sayaka from mind control? wondered Yukina, feeling dizzy somehow.

“Senpai?!”

The very tip of the lawn was sinking into the sea. There, seemingly at the very edge of the waves, a boy and a girl had fallen in a tangle. The girl wore her hair in a ponytail while the boy wore a simple T-shirt and no shoes. Both seemed almost dead as they lay unconscious, their entire bodies covered in blood.

Asagi, not knowing the circumstances, ran toward the pair, her face pale. “Wait a... What is this...?! Attempted lovers’ suicide?!”

Now that she mentioned it, Sayaka’s right hand was gripping a blood-drenched long sword, and Kojou’s belly had scars from being impaled. It really did look like the aftermath of a lover’s quarrel that ended with the girl stabbing the boy before joining him in death.

“Hey, Kojou, hang in there! You too, Kirasaka... What the hell’s going on here?!”

With Sayaka’s body slumped over Kojou’s, Asagi dragged them away. She proceeded to pull both of them, in danger of sinking into the sea, back onto dry land when Kojou, somehow having regained consciousness, objected in a raspy voice:

“That hurts... Shit. Don’t shake me too much. I’ve got a hole in my gut and almost died and all.”

Without thinking, Asagi peered over Kojou’s crimson-smeared T-shirt. “... What?! A hole in your gut... Huh?!”

Then Yukina addressed the collapsed Sayaka. “Sayaka, how do you feel? Are you injured?”

She didn’t have any major injuries visible. The collar of her school shirt was unnaturally loose, but that was about all.

Yukina sullenly knitted her brows when she noticed vestiges of bleeding from something like a hickey on Sayaka’s slender neck.

“Yukina...?”

Sayaka opened her eyes with a vacant expression. Looking up with Yukina in

her field of vision, she tilted her head, almost like she suspected she was still dreaming.

“You’ve come to?”

“Where...am I? I met that creepy Six Blades chick at Kusuki-Elysée, and then —”

Sayaka murmured in a fickle voice when she suddenly gasped, snapping back to lucidity. “Kojou Akatsuki?! Are you all right?! I kinda ran Lustrous Scale through your chest at full force, though...!”

Naturally, even Yukina was aghast at Sayaka’s stunning confession. “Ran through his chest...?!”

Apparently Kojou hadn’t engaged in exaggeration or hyperbole when he said he had a hole in his gut and had almost died.

Yukina could understand the logic: Kojou, an amateur at combat, required a sacrifice on that level to stop Sayaka from moving. *But why did he have to do something reckless like this behind my back?* thought Yukina, feeling rather indignant.

Not knowing what Yukina shouted in her heart, Kojou sat up and addressed Sayaka in a laid-back voice. “...What, so you *do* remember what you did when you were controlled.”

Even though he grimaced from pain as he spoke, he didn’t appear to be all that hard-pressed by his wounds. No doubt, the super-healing power vampire primogenitors possessed was at work.

Sayaka had tears in her eyes as she looked between her bloodstained right hand and Kojou’s face and said:

“K-Kojou Akatsuki. I...er...”

“Oh...that’s okay, don’t worry about it. I brought it on myself, and the wound’s mostly closed up already. I got the blood I lost back from you and all.”

“R-right...”

Sayaka hung her head in dejection as she pressed a hand to her own neck. Surely the blush-like redness on her cheeks was not solely from being bathed in

the rays of the morning sun.

Maybe she felt guilty for hurting Kojou, but Sayaka's oddly meek demeanor made Kojou avert his eyes, as if he was blushing a little, too.

"Incidentally, Sayaka, can you...do something about those clothes? It's kinda hard to look at you like this..."

"...Eh?!"

When Kojou pointed it out to her, Sayaka realized for the first time that her collar was open. Exposed down to her bra, she let out a constrained shriek, covering her cleavage.

For a time, Asagi gazed at the mushy scene between Kojou and Sayaka in silence, then she finally said, "I see... I have a pretty good idea how you ended up in this state."

Similarly, Yukina trained a frosty gaze toward Kojou. "I might have expected, senpai. To think you would drink Sayaka's blood the instant you are out of our sight. Did you have this in mind when you sent me after Yume?"

Meanwhile, Sayaka hugged her knees as she sat where she was.

"Being seen like this...and by Yukina of all people... I just wanna die. Kill me now..."

She gave off a very gloomy aura as she kept murmuring to herself over and over.

Sensing that everyone was blaming him, Kojou lost his wits and looked all around him.

"Eh? Erm? Why are you talking like I did something bad? I saved Kirasaka, right?"

"More importantly, senpai...about Yume..."

Yukina, feeling dispirited over Kojou's laid-back demeanor, changed the subject.

"...I could not bring her back. I apologize."

"That so... We really do have to do somethin' about that Riru personality,

then...”

Kojou scratched his head in dismay. Riru had returned to Kusuki-Elysée of her own will. He couldn't possibly blame Yukina for being unable to bring her back.

But Yukina bit her lip hard and shook her head.

“I was able to return Yume to consciousness. However, afterward, there was powerful demonic energy interference from the bottom of the sea, and Yume suddenly said that she would end it all, so—”

“...Demonic energy interference?” Kojou inquired, perplexed.

He could understand that Kusuki-Elysée wanted Yume because she was a rare type of demon, but he didn't know what she had to do with demonic energy transmitted from the bottom of the sea. Besides, what on Earth did *end it all* even mean?

With Kojou and Yukina falling silent before her eyes, Sayaka hastily murmured, “How can this be...? They've come to that stage already...?!”

Kojou and Yukina looked back at her in surprise.

“Sayaka?”

“Sayaka, do you know what that Kiriha chick wants? If you do, tell us. We don't know anything about what's going on here. What does Kusuki-Elysée plan to do with Yume?”

“Er...ah, that's...”

With Yukina and Kojou strongly pressing the issue, Sayaka instantly looked conflicted. She was no doubt hesitant to share the details of her mission as a Shamanic War Dancer. But perhaps she thought it was unavoidable after already dragging them in that far, because Sayaka then exhaled in apparent resignation.

“Yume Eguchi's role is that of a...human sacrifice.”

“...Human sacrifice?”

“Kusuki-Elysée's Chairman Kusuki intends to use succubus mind-control powers to control a living weapon submerged at the bottom of the sea. Yume

Eguchi is the human sacrifice chosen for that purpose. She's the successor to Lilith, the Witch of the Night—in other words, the World's Mightiest Succubus."

"World's Mightiest...Succubus?"

Kojou echoed Sayaka's seemingly unreal words like an idiot. Yukina and Kojou were both in shock. But none present ventured to deny Sayaka's statement. However absurd they might think it, an example defying all common sense, known as the World's Mightiest Vampire, stood right before their eyes. Consequently, there being a World's Mightiest Succubus wasn't all *that* strange.

Asagi suddenly remembered something and asked, "By 'living weapon submerged at the bottom of the sea,' what, like those Nalakuvera a while back?"

She was a witness to the Nalakuvera landing on Itogami Island during a terrorist incident several months prior. Though they'd managed to restrain the damage to a minimum, the Nalakuvera's combat capabilities were shocking. They'd been on the verge of Itogami Island entirely being reduced to ash.

If a living weapon sleeping at the bottom of the sea rivaled the Nalakuvera, it wasn't strange that there were those wanting to put their hands on it. That was even more true for a corporation at the cutting edge of demon beast ecological research.

But Sayaka shook her head with a look of unconcealed fear in her eyes.

"No. The Nalakuvera were built by the Devas, in other words, an ancient race of super-humans. They might have had a civilization rivaling modern science, but in the end, they were only human."

Then, Sayaka glared straight at the sea, under the fresh twilight, as her voice shook.

"But this living weapon is different. It's a monster from the Age of the Gods. It's not something humankind can control."

Yukina murmured, seeming to pose the question to herself, "So that's why they're sacrificing Yume...?"

Asagi shrugged her shoulders and sighed deeply as she stated with irony,

“Since way back, it’s been customary to sacrifice virgins to quell the anger of monsters.”

“What in the world is this monster, then—?” Kojou asked Sayaka, shooting a glare her way.

Sayaka seemed timid as she looked back at him. Her strained smile was casual, somehow.

“Even you must know the name, at least.”

“Eh?”

“It’s a sea monster they wrote about in the Bible, the Serpent of Jealousy, the mightiest creature fashioned by the gods—

“—Leviathan.”



CHAPTER FOUR
ANOTHER
MIGHTIEST ONE

CHAPTER FOUR

ANOTHER MIGHTIEST ONE

1

In the central section of Demon Beast Park, the Kusuki-Elysée research facility was built on a cape jutting into the sea. The building had a futuristic silhouette, like a silver-colored spiral seashell lodged into the surface of the ground.

Four boats privately owned by Kusuki-Elysée were moored at a designated seaside pier. Two of these were haulers for transporting demon beasts and their feed. Another was a high-speed runner used as a ferry to Itogami Island. The final one was an odd-looking submarine painted snow-white.

The *Yotaka* had a bizarre silhouette, bulging in odd places. The hull was encased in thick metal, with its stern equipped with two giant propulsion screws. Kusuki-Elysée had bought a small prototype submarine originally for military use.

Developed for reconnaissance, the hull did not even reach fifty meters in length. The cockpit, built for three people, was cramped. At the back of the narrow piloting station was a transparent water tank, resembling a casket, which stood vertically.

Inside the water tank, filled with blue liquid, was Yume Eguchi, eyes closed, wearing an outfit resembling a swimsuit.

“—So this is LYL. Unexpectedly small, yes?”

Kazuomi Kusuki murmured while gazing at the machines packing the space around the water tank. Even though he noticed Yume embedded within, he merely narrowed his eyes with indifference.

“Properly speaking, ’tis but one part of LYL—the control module.”

Kusuki, standing on a mobile crane, heard a voice from over the speaker behind him. It was a synthetic voice that sounded like a throaty, middle-aged man. The voice spoke with turns of phrases well behind the times; minor traces of foreign pronunciation lingered.

Slowly looking back, Kusuki saw an odd vehicle completely clad in red armor. The mass of metal resembled a tortoise, with four short, stubby legs sticking out of it. It was a prototype micro-tank for urban warfare against demons.

“The calculations required to control the Serpent are being conducted on the mainframe here at the lab. The weak battery of a submarine cannot support a system on the required scale, so ’tis a precaution against unforeseen circumstances.”

“A wise decision. Perhaps further improvement would allow solo control of the Serpent, however.”

The robot tank driver’s words did not change Kusuki’s expression; he simply nodded.

The person secluded inside the tank was a skilled hacker known as Tanker. It was *she* who had designed the special system Kusuki-Elysée had dubbed *LYL*. Bizarre appearance notwithstanding, her skill as a programmer was the real deal. And if his underlings were skillful, Kusuki cared nothing about their external appearances.

“What of Yume Eguchi? You put her to sleep?”

Kusuki finally asked about Yume, there in the water tank. Tanker, still connected to the submarine via countless cables, slowly turned the camera around.

“’Tis a half-awakened state, for Lilith shall lose her supply of demonic energy if consciousness is lost. In other words, the girl is dreaming at the moment.”

“...I see. So only a succubus in her dreams.”

Murmuring thus, Kusuki snorted, visibly unamused.

“It is highly ironic that the World’s Mightiest Succubus be a girl such as this. Even I feel a little sorry about sacrificing her like this—”

“But ’tis what Lilith herself desires. And it is for this purpose that LYL was created, so...”

Tanker made the statement in her exaggerated tone.

“That’s right. So the least we can do is ensure that her sacrifice is not in vain,” Kusuki said, a bold smile appearing on his face.

The next moment, a young Kusuki-Elysée staffer came running over. His face was twitching in fear as he clutched a tablet-style PC.

“Chairman—we’ve determined the Serpent’s location. It’s nearly fourteen knots southwest of the main isle of Itogami Island. Depth appears to be approximately four hundred meters.”

“’Tis just as planned.”

Tanker withdrew the cables, their duty done, and laughed with delight. A thin smile also came over Kusuki as he looked down at Yume, suspended in the water tank.

“So it has indeed been seduced by Lilith. They may call it a living weapon of the Age of the Gods, but in the end, it is only a beast. Though if it wasn’t, that would make things...difficult.”

“Th-the Serpent’s speed is estimated at sixteen knots. At this rate, there is concern the coast guard’s monitoring net might detect it in under a half hour, but—”

“Not a problem. The *Yotaka* is ready for launch, yes?”

Kusuki brushed off the worried staffer’s report and leaped aboard the white submarine. *Yotaka* was the name Kusuki had used to christen the sub.

“Once the modules finish booting up, any time.”

Tanker pulled out the final cable.

When the submarine’s maintenance hatch was closed, lights came on in the cockpit. Yume, wearing a tight-fitting outfit very much resembling a swimsuit, writhed as if in pain, kicking up bubbles inside the water tank. The machines seemingly placed to surround her raised low groans as they activated.

“Do you really intend to ride in it yourself, chairman? We haven’t confirmed that it’s completely safe yet—”

“That goes the same for those of you left at the lab, does it not? From its point of view, fourteen knots is barely off the tip of its nose.” Kusuki gently smiled at the staffer addressing him. “Besides, a king must ride a mount fit for a king. No people can zealously follow a ruler that shuts himself inside a castle.”

“Thou speaketh true,” Tanker replied in good humor to Kusuki’s theatrical words.

Kusuki gave the robot tank a parting glance before shifting his gaze farther along the pier. There stood a young woman, seeming to bear witness to Kusuki boarding the submarine.

She had black hair and a black school uniform—Kiriha Kisaki.

“—I thank you for your cooperation. If I am able to safely tame the Serpent, I shall see that you are richly rewarded,” Kusuki stated in a tone like a dictator making a public address.

With a cackle, Tanker shook the vehicle around.

“Your consideration is unnecessary, Mr. Chairman. After all, I am advancing my own schemes as well.”

“Very frank of you, albeit that makes your words all the more trustworthy.”

Kusuki nodded in satisfaction and made his way into the submarine. He closed the thick double hatch and entered the narrow, silent cockpit. The main monitor in front of the pilot seat was displaying a 3-D image of the current status under the sea. An enormous shadow was leisurely swimming in the center.

The white submarine began to submerge. Kusuki’s field of vision was dyed blue. As he gazed at the beautiful underwater sights, Kusuki ferociously laughed to himself.

“Now, let us be off, king of demon beasts. Show me your power, like the Lost Warlord once did, and bring judgment upon the arrogant human race...”

The curtains of the girls' room at the cottage were closed. Smack in the middle of a row of three beds, Asagi Aiba was opening up a mobile PC. Kojou was looking over her shoulder and peeking at the screen. Yukina and Sayaka were planted on either side.

Even though Kojou was surrounded by girls his own age, he didn't feel his heart fluttering, thanks to the high-stakes situation: hacking the coast guard's control room.

"Here we go... This is probably it. Leviathan."

Asagi spoke while tapping into anti-submarine patrol craft. The image displayed was a motley of orange-and-green patterns, much like a fish-finder's display.

Kojou craned his neck and watched it for a while.

"That image's hard to get a read on. Where is the thing?"

"I said, *this* is it. It's all Leviathan from start to finish."

"Huh?"

Kojou blinked, his eyes going wide as he stared at the part Asagi was pointing at. He looked between it and the surrounding terrain, rechecking the characters displayed with the image several times over.

"Er, but that's...a little too big! How many meters is this thing?!"

"My rough estimate is a total length of about four kilometers. Maybe that's unexpectedly small for a legendary sea monster?"

Asagi made the statement in a dry, detached voice. From the point of view of a denizen of the digital world like Asagi, she had to accept what the data displayed, no matter how crazy the numbers.

Unsurprisingly, Yukina stared at Asagi in bewilderment.

"Is this really a living creature?"

"Guess they don't call it the World's Mightiest Demon Beast for nothing.

Aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines have nothing on this.”

Asagi casually shrugged her shoulders for all to see. As if to back up her words, Sayaka grudgingly opened her mouth.

“Leviathan is a living weapon from antiquity—the Age of the Gods. Previously, all that had been worked out was that it existed, but fortunately it’s been in a dormant state until now. It’s simply been loitering at the bottom of the deep sea along dragon lines. Aside from sinking the occasional unfortunate ship, it hasn’t made any effort to attack humankind.”

“Wait, so the chairman of Kusuki-Elysée thinks he can tame that thing?”

“That’s right, using the power of Lilith sleeping inside Yume Eguchi.”

Sayaka nodded in response to Kojou’s question. Somehow, her expression seemed pained. She no doubt felt responsible for being unable to fulfill her mission to keep Yume safe.

“Lilith...the World’s Mightiest Succubus, you said?”

Kojou’s face was hard as he posed the question.

He knew that a type of demon known as succubi existed, but meeting one in the flesh had been a first even for Kojou, living in a Demon Sanctuary. Even the words *World’s Mightiest Succubus* didn’t coalesce into any kind of firm image in his mind. That surely went the same for Asagi and Yukina.

Sayaka, somehow feeling benevolent, politely explained:

“Succubi aren’t very powerful as demons go. Their mind control only works when their victims are defenseless, such as when they are asleep. Besides, interbreeding with human beings means there are virtually no pure-blooded succubi remaining.”

If there were no pure-blooded succubi remaining, that meant Yume was likely a mix of human and succubus herself. Small wonder Kojou and the others hadn’t realized she was a demon.

“But even though their power is generally weak, an exception sometimes appears: a succubus with incredibly powerful mind-control powers. Representative of this group is—”

“Lilith, right?”

“Yes,” Sayaka said with a grave nod. “As a race, succubi aren’t unaging and undying like vampires, so their power is inherited via reincarnation. When a previous generation’s Lilith passes away, the next generation’s Lilith is born somewhere in the world. So completely by chance, Yume Eguchi inherited her suitability as a vessel for Lilith.”

“So she was living as a normal human being when her power as the World’s Mightiest Succubus awakened one day?”

I can relate to that, thought Kojou, biting his lip. From Kojou’s point of view, having had the “condition” of being the World’s Mightiest Vampire suddenly thrust upon him, he couldn’t help but feel an affinity for Yume. Even more, because Yume was an elementary schooler. She had to have been shaken by it even more deeply than Kojou had.

“I’m sure she was in shock, and apparently there was friction with both her parents. There’s even a report stating she was subjected to child abuse.”

“I see... So they ended up trading Yume to Kusuki-Elysée,” Kojou murmured as a look of understanding finally came over him.

Since meeting Kojou and the others the day before, Yume had not said she wanted to go back to her parents even once. Now they knew why.

Asagi knitted her eyebrows in displeasure and asked, “So Kusuki-Elysée knew from the beginning that Yume’s power would let them control Leviathan?”

If Kusuki-Elysée did know that, they must have made the deal for Yume with the intention of using her as a human sacrifice from the start.

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Unexpectedly, Sayaka calmly shook her head.

“Succubi are easily persecuted, so Kusuki-Elysée finances their care and support. After all, succubus abilities are very effective for taming demon beasts, so they might well become future workers at Kusuki-Elysée and staffers at Demon Beast Park.”

“So they expect a return on investment, huh...? Sounds pretty credible,”

Kojou murmured, bewildered.

Protecting succubi not only bolstered Kusuki-Elysée's corporate image, it also enabled them to obtain valuable employees as well. To the succubi themselves, support from a major corporation was surely something to welcome. Until now, both had been linked together in a virtuous, symbiotic cycle.

And so they would have remained, were it not for the existence of Leviathan.

Asagi sank into thought with a serious expression. "So Kusuki-Elysée didn't take custody of Yume because she's Lilith...? Is it possible they didn't even realize she was Lilith until after the fact...?"

If Sayaka's explanation was the truth, it was mere coincidence that Kusuki-Elysée had taken custody of Yume. It didn't have anything to do with the current situation.

"Now that I think about it, most people wouldn't think you can use that power to control Leviathan just because it's effective for training demon beasts. It's just too much of a logical leap... In other words, someone whispered into the ear of a higher-up at Kusuki-Elysée and told him that Lilith and Leviathan were connected..."

Kojou turned to Asagi in surprise. "So someone instigated them using Yume to tame Leviathan, then...?"

Yukina's breath suddenly caught.

"Could it be that the Bureau of Astrology's—?"

Kiriha Kisaki—Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology. It was she, and those with her, who'd guided Kusuki-Elysée and brought about the present situation. By that thinking, Yukina could understand just why Kiriha had brought Yume back with her.

Sayaka suddenly began to explain, no doubt for the benefit of Kojou, thin on historical knowledge.

"...Lilith and Leviathan are both symbols of the Seven Deadly Sins. Also, both are deeply intertwined with serpents in myth. Some say that Lilith was the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden; others say it was Leviathan.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is unmistakable that the two beings have an affinity for each other.”

Kojou’s expression hardened at the unexpected connection between Yume and the monster dwelling at the bottom of the sea.

“So seeing Lilith granted powerful mind-control powers, as the former control unit for Leviathan, a living weapon fashioned by the gods, is a deduction no small number of humans educated in sorcery would make. It is no surprise the Bureau of Astrology noticed, even if the chairman of Kusuki-Elysée did not.”

“—Ain’t it the job of the Bureau of Astrology to stop natural disasters caused by demon beasts before they happen? If that’s so, them wanting to control Leviathan feels like a pretty strange story to me.”

Kojou murmured his sudden doubt about the information presented. Yukina and Sayaka glared at him from left and right, seemingly hemming him in.

“That is indeed strange.”

“If it was dangerous, sure, but if it’s a monster doing no harm to people, just chasing its own tail at the bottom of the ocean, why go out of their way to poke the bear?”

“Well, that’s what I wanna know! Go ask that Kiriha chick yourselves!” Kojou tried desperately to deflect, cowed by their vigor.

Sayaka’s lips tapered like a sulking child. “Well, I sure plan on doing that the next time I see her!”

“But setting the Bureau of Astrology’s intentions aside, why is Kusuki-Elysée cooperating with them?” Yukina ignored the feud between Kojou and Sayaka, airing the question in comparative calm.

Asagi tapped her keyboard, dancing only to her own tune. “I have a pretty good idea why. That Kusuki guy, the chairman of Kusuki-Elysée, is the financier behind True Ark.”

“True Ark?”

Yukina blinked and cocked her head, having never heard of the organization. Asagi displayed the corporate website on her mobile PC’s screen.

“—A self-declared environmental protection group, but more like ecoterrorists doing sabotage in the name of saving the environment. They’ve raided scientific survey ships in the name of protecting demon beasts, destroyed anti-demon beast protective nets, interfered with hunting down demon beasts that have attacked human settlements—well, all run-of-the-mill criminal activities.”

“What’s the chairman of a corp buying and selling demon beasts doing sending money to a group like that?” Kojou grimaced.

Asagi sighed, as if she, too, found it annoying.

“People like that don’t pay attention to little things like hypocrisy. They decide their cause is just, and their thought process stops then and there.”

That sort of thing, huh? Kojou shared her irritation.

Of course, the protection of endangered species of demon beasts was meaningful work, but that didn’t mean anything and everything was permitted for its sake. Attacking humans to protect demon beasts was beyond the pale, all the more so for Kusuki-Elysée, which captured demon beasts and sold them or used them for its own research.

His support for terrorist activities was probably his own personal idea, which in Kojou’s mind made his flawed logic seem all the more flawed.

“Although, it’s a bit of a problem if a radical demon beast preservationist gets his hands on the World’s Mightiest Living Weapon. What’s to stop him from saying *I’ll slaughter everyone who harms a demon beast?*”

“...You’ve gotta be kidding me! You mean that Kusuki bastard’s gonna sacrifice Yume for the sake of self-centered ‘justice’ like that?!”

Kojou was breathing raggedly. Between the cracks of his clenched fingers, irrepressible demonic energy leaked out, scattering pale blue sparks about.

No doubt, the man named Kusuki intended to use Leviathan for terrorism. If Leviathan’s power was the real thing, he could challenge entire nations to battle. He’d try to intimidate those who captured and hunted demon beasts by forcing his own beliefs onto them.

“It really does feel like a bad joke. I’m a tolerant person, and even I’m pissed!”

Apparently, Kojou wasn’t the only one feeling heated. Asagi’s angry fingers vigorously tapped the keyboard; the mobile PC’s LCD screen became buried in countless English characters and numbers.

Perhaps Asagi’s hostile demeanor made Sayaka feel concerned, because she timidly asked, “A-Aiba...? Er, ah... What are...you doing?”

However, Asagi didn’t even glance her way as deciphered data popped up on the screen and she said:

“...LYL? In Leviathan’s control module... *Yotaka*, huh...? I see. So they’re running the operation itself out of the lab. It’s like a control room for a space shuttle.”

“Wait, don’t tell me you broke into Kusuki-Elysée’s computers? H-how...?” Sayaka froze in obvious shock, forgetting even to blink.

Asagi was invading Kusuki-Elysée’s internal corporate network. It was completely illegal access—a blatant felony. More to the point, Asagi had taken no more time to do such a thing than crossing an intersection during a red light. Nor was it likely she was clumsy enough to leave any evidence.

“Kojou!”

“Yeah?”

“Yume’s on a submarine heading for Leviathan. Kusuki’s aboard, too.”

“Submarine? Are they trying to latch onto Leviathan’s back?!”

That’s bad, thought Kojou, groaning in the back of his throat. Naturally, he and the others had no means of getting Yume back if she was submerged at the bottom of the sea.

“The real control system for Leviathan is this LYL system at the Kusuki-Elysée lab. If we take that over, we’ll squish Kusuki’s plans, at least.”

“LYL...you said?”

Kojou’s face hardened, for the words had a familiar ring to them. Asagi, unaware of Riru’s existence, suspiciously looked back at Kojou’s reaction.

“To safely draw out the succubus power, a piece of Yume’s consciousness has been transferred to a computer, kind of like an artificial intelligence. It feels like an artificially created, wired doppelgänger. So this LYL takes control of Yume and draws out Lilith’s power.”

“So that’s the so-called Riru personality cooperating with Kusuki-Elysée...huh? I get it now.”

Kojou remembered the words Riru had spoken to explain her own existence: that even if Riru was controlling Yume’s body, she was a separate being, split off from Yume. Now, too, he understood why Riru was able to fully employ Yume’s succubus power when taking her over: LYL was a system built expressly for that purpose.

So long as that system was operational, Kojou and the others could not rescue Yume. Even if they brought her back by force, the Riru personality would doubtlessly emerge once more and attempt to cooperate with Kusuki. In other words, they couldn’t just go and rescue Yume, who was headed Leviathan’s way; they had to do something about the system at the Kusuki-Elysée lab, too.

Though it annoyed him, the problem was too big for Kojou to tackle single-handedly.

“—Asagi, can I leave LYL to you? I’ll go bring Yume back.”

Kojou gently rose to his feet as he posed the question. Naturally, dealing with an artificial intelligence was way outside Kojou’s field, and even that of the two girls from the Lion King Agency. He had no choice but to leave it in Asagi’s hands.

“Wa... Don’t just decide on your own, you two!! This is my mission, you know?!”

Listening to the exchange between Kojou and Asagi, a visibly nervous Sayaka wedged herself into the conversation. However, Asagi ignored her, looking up at Kojou as she said:

“I planned to handle that from the start, but what are you gonna do, Kojou? How do you plan on chasing a sub to get her back?”

“I figure Kirasaka can manage that somehow.”

“Eh? Me?”

Sayaka, suddenly the subject of the conversation, pointed to the tip of her nose and froze. Kojou shifted an expectant gaze toward her.

“It is your mission, after all.”

“S-springing this on me all of a sudden, though...!”

“Excuse me. Perhaps Kusuki-Elysée has a spare submarine?” Yukina modestly inquired as Sayaka broke into a cold sweat for all to see.

“That’s it,” Kojou said, snapping his fingers. “If we can nab one and go after Yume in it, fantastic.”

“Yes. That is, if there is one—”

Asagi fished her tablet PC out of her traveling bag and brought up an overhead map of the lab grounds before handing it to Kojou.

“...There’s no submarine, but there is a high-speed boat. I think I can control it from here through the autopilot. You might or might not catch Yume and Kusuki before they get there, but you might have a shot at them while Leviathan surfaces.”

Just how many computers did you bring here? thought Kojou in exasperation, accepting the tablet. Apparently, the dock was in the deepest part of Demon Beast Park. Just getting there looked like it’d be a bit of an ordeal.

“Well then, it would be good to depart as quickly as possible.”

“...Himeragi, you’re coming, too?”

Kojou looked back in surprise as Yukina rose to her feet, calmly gripping her spear. “Ahem,” Yukina said, deliberately clearing her throat.

“I watch over you, after all. Of course I am going with you, senpai. Besides... bringing Yume back was my responsibility.”

“Er, um... This is my...mission and all...”

Sayaka hugged her silver long sword, asserting her own existence in a frail voice. However, her earnest assertion of self was promptly erased by the sound of the door suddenly bursting open.

“Yo... Hey, ah, where are you guys goin’? All up and at ’em this early in the morning...”

It was the freshly arriving Yaze, entering the girls’ room without so much as a knock. They’d left him asleep out in the corridor, but apparently he’d just woken up.

“Nothing at all! Just go sleep!”

Explaining everything struck Kojou as a great deal of trouble, so he roughly tossed a pillow, smacking Yaze in the chest.

The time was shortly after seven AM. Considering he’d stayed up late the night before, the order could not have been that unreasonable, but—

“Nah, I mean, you say that, but there’s gotta be a juicy secret behind a big fuss in the morning like this.”

Why did Yaze have to choose that moment to make sensible arguments?

Asagi, hearing that petty declaration, looked back at him, visibly irritated.

“Just shut up and make my breakfast. Go to the convenience store and buy something!”

“Wait, what...?! Convenience store? You’re at a barely set-up resort, you kn—”

“Shut up! Get going!”

The despotic command from his childhood friend sent Yaze scurrying out of the cottage, grumbling all the while. Kojou and the others exhaled with relief as they saw him go; then, they hurriedly prepared for Yume’s rescue.

3

Kojou and the others boarded an automated electric cart and headed for Demon Beast Park.

In anticipation of shipborne combat, Kojou wore a minimalist outfit: a T-shirt and swimming trunks. Yukina covered her swimsuit with a large nylon parka and wore a black case for a bodyboard on her back. Of course, Snowdrift Wolf was

inside the case. Beyond that...

“Huh, you brought a swimsuit, Sayaka?”

Kojou posed the question while looking at Sayaka, who’d changed clothes at some point.

Sayaka was wearing a pink bikini with ribbon at the edges. She did happen to wear a shirt along with it, but if anything, the open shirt only served to further pronounce the swimsuit, which greatly accentuated her breasts.

“I, ah, borrowed it from Aiba. I mean, I couldn’t go walking around covered in blood, right? There wasn’t anything else that’d fit me... It—it looks weird, doesn’t it...?”

Sayaka gave him little sideways glances as she reacted.

“Ah? Er, I don’t think there’s any special problem concerning your size...,” Kojou replied in a businesslike tone.

Sayaka’s eyebrows rose in annoyance. “What’s with that sudden politeness?!”

“Well, you looked like you’d slice me out of the blue if I made a careless comment... More to the point, you have a nice body, so you should just stand taller. If you lean forward like that, you emphasize certain things, and it gets pretty far-out, so...”

“Huh? Lean forward?”

Sayaka looked down at her own breasts, her cheeks instantly turning crimson. She hadn’t realized it, but thanks to Asagi’s swimsuit being one size too small for the Shamanic War Dancer, Sayaka’s cleavage was on full display. When she leaned forward like that, Kojou couldn’t help but get an eyeful.

When Sayaka realized that, she silently shifted a hand around her back, pulling her long sword out of the newspaper print she’d been using as camouflage.

“I-I’ll kill you! I should kill you right here!”

“And there you go, doin’ that again! I was just giving friendly advice!”

“Shut up, you Pervogenitor—!”

Sayaka moved to smack Kojou with a hearty uppercut swing of her long sword. Suddenly, a spear glimmering in a frigid silver color was thrust before their eyes.

“Is this really the time for you two to fool around?”

Kojou’s and Sayaka’s faces both froze at Yukina’s voice, drenched in quiet hostility.

“H-Himeragi...?!”

“You’re wrong, Yukina. Th-this is all the Fourth Sex Offender’s do—”

“And I’m not fooling around at all, geez! This chick blew her lid all by her—”

“—What? You are dissatisfied with something?”

Yukina turned a stare as cold as ice toward Kojou and Sayaka as both continued making excuses. The Sword Shaman’s uncharacteristically imposing demeanor made them both shudder and lower their heads.

“S-sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Yukina said. She puffed her cheeks and glanced down at her chest, covered by her parka, as she let out a light sigh.

Huh, it’s not often Yukina gets ticked off like that, thought Kojou, thinking it a little odd even as he looked ahead. They had finally arrived at Demon Beast Park’s front gate.



The area around the park was surrounded by high-voltage electrified fencing, with heavy shutters lowered over the entrance. The equipment was probably installed to prevent a demon beast breakout, but they doubled as serious impediments to human beings trying to break in.

Kojou grumbled as he glanced at his watch.

“Oh yeah, it’s still closed at this hour... How the hell do we get inside?”

Kojou, an incomplete vampire, had virtually no “vampiric” special abilities. He could neither turn into mist to get around nor fly through the air.

Busting through the fencing was a simple matter, but he was of course hesitant to engage in destructive activities unrelated to their proper goal. He wanted to keep a low profile and not involve regular staff, if at all possible.

“When I brought Yume Eguchi out of here, I went into an underground drainage pipe, but...it’s not usable anymore.” Sayaka also appeared conflicted as she glared at the fencing and groaned.

“You mean Kusuki-Elysée is watching it now?”

“No. It’s just that I kind of broke it when I was escaping...”

Yukina and Kojou stared with blank faces at Sayaka’s casual confession. It was a rather sloppy escape for a so-called expert assassin.

“Sayaka...”

“For an honors student, you sure don’t act like one.”

“No, I...! You’re wrong! That Six Blades woman attacked, so I had no choice but to...”

Kojou let Sayaka’s words professing her innocence wash over him as he listlessly scratched his head.

“Well, if you think about it calmly, breaking into a corporate lab and running off with a sub are run-of-the-mill crimes, even if it’s not Sayaka doing it... If we get arrested, that’ll be bad, right?”

“What do you mean, even if it’s not me doing it...?!” Sayaka’s cheeks puffed up as she objected to being pegged as a criminal.

While Kojou and the others were standing around talking, Yume was getting closer to Leviathan. Thinking about that made Kojou nervous.

“Er, I mean, I’m not really emotionally prepared for barging in and hijacking a ship like this—,” he said.

“Goodness, what kind of man are you? Weren’t you supposed to be a cruel, heartless vampire primogenitor, never shedding a tear?”

“Well, excuse me! I’m not the kind of big shot who runs his own Dominion. I just wanna live in peace like a regular city citizen!”

Kojou’s voice grew coarse toward Sayaka’s irrational criticisms. Suddenly, the group heard a cry not from Kojou but from somewhere farther away.

“Wait, senpai... Something’s off in Demon Beast Park...”

Yukina rushed toward the park’s fencing, for the anomalies had occurred within Demon Beast Park itself: violent ground tremors, discordant cries, the sounds of heavy things crashing against something, and the screams of people fleeing in panic—

Kojou was shaken when he realized what was wrong.

“The demon beasts are going berserk...?!”

From top to bottom, the demon beasts of Demon Beast Park were running amok all at once. The schools being fed outdoors, the species being trained inside pens and buildings, and even the aquatic demon beasts in outdoor pools were completely panicking.

Even from the outside, Kojou and the others were keenly aware of the emergency situation.

Sayaka went pale as she murmured, “They’re scared. They can sense Leviathan approaching—”

On a whim, Leviathan had unleashed a massive wave of demonic energy. The demon beasts’ keen senses had detected this and had become terrified, fearful of death.

“...How many demon beasts are kept here, anyway?”

“Three hundred species; twenty-two hundred beasts in total,” Yukina sternly answered Kojou.

The hopeless figure sent Kojou’s vision spinning.

“This is bad... If they get out of Demon Beast Park, there’ll be nothing we can do...,” Kojou murmured to himself as he painfully grasped the gravity of the situation.

Certainly, Demon Beast Park was designed to stop demon beasts from escaping, but those precautions were mainly created with fierce demon beasts in mind. But now, even peaceful demon beasts, ones never expected to harm a human being, had fallen into a state of terror. If they all started going berserk without regard for self-preservation, such measures couldn’t hold them all back.

Already, demon beasts had begun running wild and breaking the fences all over the park and inside the lab. Flames flickered in a number of locations. Some of the pens had been destroyed, and the first demon beasts to escape had already wrecked the park’s interior security systems, further exacerbating the chaos.

Even if all three hundred species would not escape the park, it seemed only a matter of time before nearly half that number broke out. Kojou couldn’t even conceive of the damage if they raged through the tourist-filled amusement park and pool areas. The Demon Beast Park staff couldn’t put a stop to that on their own.

Yukina stared at the silver long sword held by the Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency and asked, “Sayaka, can you use Lustrous Scale?”

The Lustrous Scale was a Der Freischütz, a suppression weapon. High-density curses woven by whistling arrows activated high-end curses beyond the vocal cords of human beings. With the power of such cursed arrows, neutralizing several thousand demon beasts at once was surely within its capabilities.

However, Sayaka looked helpless as she shook her head.

“I have suppressive curse arrows left, so I think I can put them to sleep, but it’s just not possible to cover an entire area this large. If we at least had them in

a single area, then maybe—”

“Gist being, gotta gather them in one spot, huh...?”

Kojou seemed to mull over and repackaging Sayaka’s words with a low groan. It wasn’t the time to be picky. Crimson mist surged out of the fingertips he thrust above his head, and with it, enormous demonic energy.

“Kojou Akatsuki?!”

“—C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!!”

Heedless of the surprised Sayaka, Kojou summoned a giant Beast Vassal that flickered like a mirage. It was a bicorn with a scarlet mane. Its huge body, over ten meters in length, was a mass of raging oscillations.

The twin horns protruding from its head resonated like a tuning fork, unleashing a fiendish wave of vibrations. Then, the roar became a shell formed of shock waves, pulverizing Demon Beast Park’s front gate without a trace.

“Shit, so it comes down to this—!”

Kojou agonized over the wreckage wrought by his own Beast Vassal as he headed into Demon Beast Park.

The emergence of fiendish demonic energy rivaling even Leviathan’s began to send the demon beasts inside the park into an all-new panic.

4

“Yes, yes, seizure of administrative rights is complete.”

Asagi hummed to herself as she assumed control of the Kusuki-Elysée laboratory’s network. It hadn’t taken even a minute—but Asagi looked dissatisfied.

“That took more time than I expected. If it was gonna be this much trouble, I should’ve brought something more powerful than a little laptop. The bandwidth just isn’t cutting it... Mogwai, how’s your end?”

“I’ve found this ‘LYL’...but you said this is a doppelgänger...?!”

Asagi's partner and support AI replied in an oddly human-sounding tone. Its sarcastic, synthetic voice was shrill, as if to demonstrate that, for once, its interest had been piqued. It sounded a little worked up at realizing just what LYL was.

The results of Mogwai's analysis of LYL's capabilities popped up on the computer's LCD screen. LYL's AI strength score was extremely high, displaying that she could nearly completely simulate a human being's personality.

She'd been patched into the system by hooking Yume Eguchi's consciousness to a magical device. She was capable of taking over Yume's physical body and stably drawing out her powers as a succubus. That much, Asagi had expected.

It was not LYL's capabilities that had Asagi and Mogwai bewildered. Rather, it was the nature of the data from which the artificial intelligence had been created—in other words, it was her memories and personality traits that shocked them.

“What is this...? It's like a big blob of hatred toward humankind...!”

Asagi cleared her dry throat.

Rage, malice, jealousy, resentment, destructive impulses, and suicidal desires—LYL contained all the evil thoughts human beings possessed. Even at a young age, no doubt Yume was no exception to that rule.

Someone had taken out only the wicked parts inside Yume and embedded them into an artificial intelligence.

“Keh-keh... This is incredible. Use this thing as a control system for the World's Mightiest Living Weapon? Someone's got some guts.”

Mogwai laughed in apparent delight. Asagi rudely brushed her bangs away from her eyebrows.

“I see... Those inheriting the soul of Lilith receive a concentrate of negative emotions... So they took out, condensed, and digitized only those parts.”

The moment after Asagi murmured quietly, a bizarre voice began to flow through the computer's speakers. It was a digitized, synthetic voice, sounding like a throaty middle-aged man speaking in unnatural Japanese, like out of a

historical drama.

“Ka-ka... Thou art correct, empress. And you are in good health as well, Mogwai?”

“You’re...!”

Asagi glared at the ID of the person intruding into her voice chat with Mogwai, clenching her teeth in frustration.

“That silly way of talking...! Lydianne Didier, is that you...?! What the hell are you doing here, Tanker?!”

“Hmm, if thou must ask, I shall answer thy words verily. I have been assigned to administer this system by my client, the Bureau of Astrology.”

The owner of the voice, known as Tanker, replied in apparent defiance. Lydianne Didier was a freelance hacker traveling in the same circles as Asagi. She was employed part-time by the Gigafloat Management Corporation because she was an exceptional interceptor, locating intruders and sending them packing.

However, in real life, she was a foreign girl barely twelve years old. Furthermore, she was an elite raised at Didier Heavy Industries, a large corporation based in Neustria in Western Europe.

“You’re LYL’s administrator...?! Don’t tell me the design of this system is your work, too?” Asagi accused, her voice oozing hostility.

The artificial intelligence was a succubus’s malice in concentrated form, and nothing else. Asagi was angered by the fact that it was administered by a little girl hacker no older than Yume.

“Indeed. Though more precisely, I merely provided the vessel for transferring the personality.”

“Don’t you understand how dangerous a thing like this is?!” Asagi warned in a low voice.

If LYL, a concentrated mass of wicked intent, gained complete control of Leviathan, it would probably kick up an incredible storm of destruction on the surface. The matter was no mere child’s play.

However, Tanker calmly laughed.

“Of course I know. However, I possess an objective of my own.”

“Excuse me? Your objective?”

“Indeed. For instance, seriously engaging the empress in a contest of arms like this—is it not a rather rare experience—?”

Asagi shook her head in annoyance at Tanker’s taunting words.

Though an unfortunate fact from Asagi’s point of view, she was known in a certain part of the corporate world as a legendary hacker, dubbed with the rather embarrassing nickname of Cyber Empress. If Tanker could drive Asagi away, her name fame would doubtlessly rise by leaps and bounds. In the first place, given Tanker’s personality, she’d probably been eagerly awaiting an opportunity to go toe-to-toe with Asagi.

“Aw, geez! Of course it turns into something like this... So annoying...!”

Asagi violently tapped her keyboard, activating hacking tools she’d crafted herself.

Even if she was a little girl, Lydianne Didier’s hacking skills were the real deal. Asagi had no guarantee she could beat her.

“How’s it looking, Mogwai?”

“Honestly, you ought to be running around now, if you could. The PC spec disadvantage is too steep.”

“Well, I can’t do anything about that. I never thought I’d have to deal with that Tanker idiot in a place like this—!”

Even though Asagi shouted at her atypically timid partner, Mogwai’s assessment was sound. All Asagi had on hand that moment was a low-end mobile computer, a far cry from her usual equipment. Though she was able to remotely control the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s main computer system, the resulting time lag from the transmissions was a fatal flaw.

“Do not be concerned, empress, for I have filed a report to the police suitable as a warrior’s mercy. Thou shalt at least be spared the embarrassing poems on thine computer being spread far and wide.”

With Asagi backed into a corner, Tanker seemed to pity her, gazing down at her from above. Asagi made a high-pitched *kiii*.

“I don’t have poems like that! Don’t go inventing fake hobbies for other people! And for that matter, say that line to me after you beat me!”

“Hmm, those words—I should see them as thy having accepted my challenge, yes? ’Tis good, indeed!”

“Ugh...!”

Asagi had no rebuttal for Tanker taking her words as a commitment. She’d completely cut off her own line of retreat.

“Sheesh,” went Mogwai, seeming beside itself as it shook its head on the screen. *“What are you doing, li’l miss? Falling for an elementary schooler’s taunt like that...”*

“Oh, shut up! We have to do something about her either way if we wanna stop LYL, dammit. There’s one last thing I want to ask you, Tanker.”

“And what would you ask of me?”

Tanker’s voice was full of laughter. Asagi held her ragged breathing in check and turned toward her headset’s microphone.

“You said you’re working for the Bureau of Astrology, not Kusuki-Elysée, right? What the hell does the Bureau of Astrology want to use a stupid system like this for?”

“—The Bureau of Astrology’s objective is to destroy Itogami Island. Of course, Blue Elysium included.”

“Huh?”

Tanker’s reply, veering well away from her expectations, left Asagi momentarily at a loss for words.

“Wait a second. Isn’t the Bureau of Astrology an agency of the Japanese government for stopping sorcerous disasters?! How did they go from that to sinking Itogami Island?!”

“’Tis best that thou know not. For thy sake.”

There was no hint of playfulness in Tanker's voice. They were seriously trying to destroy Itogami Island.

The LCD screen of Asagi's computer was red with warning indicators. Tanker, LYL's system administrator, had apparently begun efforts to repel Asagi's invasion.

"Wha—?! W-wait up, Lydianne!"

"Parley is over, empress—en garde!" Tanker frostily declared.

Asagi cursed under her breath and began to mount her defense.

Quietly, with no one the wiser, the curtain rose on the battle, with Itogami Island's survival hanging in the balance.

5

The white submarine seemed to glide forward over the water's surface. The current location indicated on the navigational map was about twelve knots from Blue Elysium's coast. Already, there was no sign of the island's silhouette; there was only the blue surface of the ocean as far as the eye could see.

The submarine's propulsion screws slowly came to a halt. The narrow cockpit was filled with silence, with only the sound of bubbles in the water tank remaining.

Yume Eguchi was in the water tank, but her vacant eyes were rolled upward. The personality LYL had taken her over, extracting the power of the World's Mightiest Succubus without restraint and using it to lure Leviathan, loitering at the bottom of the sea.

"This is the *Yotaka*... We've arrived at the point of contact for the Serpent."

Kusuki, sitting in the pilot's seat, spoke to a transmitter. He heard the calm, collected voice of Kiriha Kisaki coming from the speaker.

"All is as anticipated, chairman. Proceed to docking phase."

"Roger," Kusuki murmured, sitting deep in his seat, completely satisfied.

They might have called it the docking phase, but it was not for Kusuki to

implement. The submarine *Yotaka* was to enter the interior of Leviathan's body and become the control unit for the World's Mightiest Demon Beast.

The living weapon from the Age of the Gods would move according to Kusuki's will. At the very least, there would be no one defying Kusuki remaining on the seas. Island nations, like Japan, would find all their lifelines at Kusuki's mercy.

Of course, Kusuki did not desire fruitless slaughter and destruction. Kusuki just thought that the present world was wrong and needed correcting.

Wars, violence, racial discrimination, environmental pollution—the present world had far too many problems. Among them, the one that Kusuki could least forgive was the treatment of demon beasts. It was said that there were between ten and twenty thousand species of demon beasts in the world on the verge of extinction. In spite of this, various peoples robbed demon beasts of their habitats and food sources, and continued the slaughter they called “eradication.” Such heresy could not be forgiven.

His plan was to awaken humankind from its arrogant ways to achieve peaceful coexistence with demon beasts. Surely it was not much of a problem if *one or two hundred million humans died* for the sake of such a lofty goal.

At present, humans and demons coexisted under the terms of the Holy Ground Treaty—but to bring that treaty into existence, the Lost Warlord had instigated a war that threw the world into incredible chaos. He'd made humankind recognize the rights of demons by piling countless corpses atop one another. In the end, Kusuki was simply doing the same.

He would display the power of the World's Mightiest Demon Beast to make them recognize the rights of demon beasts. Kusuki was the only one who could make it happen. Kusuki was the sole person who could rule the living weapon from the Age of the Gods. Kusuki was the chosen king, he who would set the world right.

And before the eyes of Kusuki, he who would be king, a great shadow emerged.

“Ohh...”

The sea parted, and an enormous, ultramarine monster came to the surface. This was Leviathan, the World's Mightiest Demon Beast—so huge that he could not accurately grasp its full length. However, its shape certainly did resemble a serpent. Or perhaps, the legendary dragon and the ichthyosaur, a dinosaur that lived on Earth in prehistoric times, were one and the same.

At the same time, it looked like a weapon. Its sleek, glossy torso resembled the latest nuclear submarines, and its translucent scales were indistinguishable from armor plating.

Perhaps due to the passage of many tens of thousands of years, Leviathan's entire body was covered in barnacles, with a number of old scars remaining. Its appearance was terrifying, and at the same time, divine.

"I see... So this is Leviathan. Truly, this is the greatest of beasts forged by the gods; ferocious, yet beautiful indeed. Do you not think so, Yume Eguchi?"

Kusuki, his voice shrill from irrepressible excitement, spoke to the girl inside the water tank. Face-to-face with the enormity of Leviathan, he no doubt finally grasped the true extent of the power of Lilith that controlled it. There was a glint of pity in Kusuki's eyes as he gazed at Yume.

"You are no mere human sacrifice to Leviathan. Take pride, for with this, you and I have gained the right to control the beast—together."

However much Kusuki might have egotistically called out to her, Yume did not reply. Instead, what he heard was the sound of the propulsion screws starting up. The white submarine was beginning to move once more, heading toward Leviathan's enormous body.

Waves from Leviathan's rise had rocked the sea, making its surface choppy, but the sub accelerated in spite of this. Then, as Leviathan loitered on the sea's surface, a great gap opened in its body, as if to welcome the approaching submarine. A deep cavity continued far within. The space was as large as a fighter hangar on an aircraft carrier.

"It is just as Attack Mage Kisaki said. There is a breathable space for humans inside Leviathan's body...a natural design feature for a weapon, I suppose..."

As they entered the interior of Leviathan's body, he sighed in admiration as

he looked all about. Finally, the snow-white submarine halted midway in the cavity. The water filling the area around them drained away, and a space was created, within which a human being could breathe air.

The submarine's floodlights illuminated a cavern some fifteen meters in diameter. The length was probably over two hundred meters. Using that cavity as a hangar and packing it with weapons, one would surely be able to dispatch soldiers to battlefields the world over.

However, in that moment, Kusuki was the only one inside of Leviathan. All the power of the World's Mightiest Demon Beast was monopolized by him alone.

Filled with a childish feeling of utter omnipotence, he was dragged back to reality by the annoying sounds of electronics echoing across the cockpit.

"—I have confirmed that docking is complete. Henceforth, Riru shall activate."

The sound of electronics was being emitted by the control module for LYL attached to the rearmost part of the cockpit. The fluid filling the water tank flowed out, and Yume Eguchi, who should have been floating within, curled her lips up in a leer.

"You started the module on your own...?!"

In front of the shocked Kusuki, the lid of the water tank slowly opened; the girl's slender fingers slipped through the cracks. Beneath her soaking-wet bangs, Yume Eguchi's face was smiling.

The girl called the World's Mightiest Succubus smiled with a malicious expression.

"—Attack Mage Kisaki, what is going on?! Lilith has awakened!"

Instinctively gripped by fear, Kusuki called out to the transmitter. From the other side, over the static, he felt like Kiriha Kisaki was making a strained grin.

"All is precisely as planned, Chairman Kusuki. I told you—Riru shall activate."

"What?!"

"—You understand what it is you must do, Riru?"

Kiriha was not speaking to the flabbergasted Kusuki, but rather, to the girl

standing behind him.

Riru swished back her wet hair and smiled. A tail and a pair of wings, infused with demonic energy, extended from her back.

“Of course, Kiriha. I just need to destroy that shitty artificial island, right?”

“—That’s crazy! Stop LYL now, Attack Mage Kisaki! This wasn’t the deal! Do you understand what you people are doing?!”

Kusuki sent spittle scattering about as he yelled. But Kisaki’s tone of voice did not change.

“Of course, chairman. This is the Bureau of Astrology’s goal, after all.”

“What did you say...?!”

“We knew from the beginning that you plotted to use Leviathan for terror activities. Normally, it is our mission to prevent such things before they take place, but we had reason to use your plan in this instance.”

“So you deceived me from the start... You conniving fox!”

Kusuki leveled insults at Kiriha as she continued speaking casually. “Kya-ha!” Riru, upon hearing this, laughed in apparent mockery.

“I don’t think you have any right to criticize Kiriha when you planned to use Yume as a human sacrifice for your goal. Hey, how does it feel to know that the real human sacrifice is *you*?”

Kusuki reddened from head to toe, hatefully glaring at Riru with bloodshot eyes. However, even if she looked like a little girl, he was still face-to-face with the World’s Mightiest Succubus; Kusuki was nowhere near her league.

“Oh no, what’s with that face? Awww, are you gonna cwy, Mister?”

Riru peered with amusement at Kusuki’s face, shuddering from humiliation and helplessness. Then, she snatched the transmitter’s microphone from Kusuki’s hands.

“Kiriha, thanks for granting Yume’s wish. I really liked how you acted all calm while you suffered from a tortured conscience.”

Kiriha was not shaken even by Riru’s malice-filled words. In a gentle, desolate

voice, she stated to Riru with just a tiny measure of compassion:

“Farewell, Riru...and to you, chairman, may you have sweet dreams—”

6

“...I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee.”

Sayaka’s solemn voice echoed, cutting through the air of Demon Beast Park, filled with shouts and screams.

She was holding a silver bow in her hands. Enormous ritual energy flowed into the cursed arrow loaded into it as she drew the bowstring.

“Most brilliant flaming horse, illustrious Kirin, He who governs heavenly thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath...!”

Fired with a roar, the cursed arrow, surrounded by a ferocious whirlwind, sailed into the sky. The violent reverberations of the sounds blown by the whistling arrow covered the air in an invisible magic circle. The thick miasma spewing out of it became a black cloud that descended upon the ground’s surface.

Hundreds of demon beasts had been gathered to a single corner of Demon Beast Park’s plaza. Kojou’s scarlet-maned Beast Vassal had herded the ones that had escaped their cages to that place. Like a sheep dog herding its flock, the Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, boasting enormous destructive power, had led the demon beasts within the cursed arrow’s effective radius.

“S-so tired...!”

Having fired cursed arrows one after another, Sayaka looked totally drained as she crouched limply. She’d used tranquilizing curses to paralyze the demon beasts that had been raging about; then she put them into a deep slumber. She’d surely bought enough time to salvage the situation.

“We managed somehow, huh...?”

Kojou exhaled raggedly as he released his summoned Beast Vassal.

Yukina nodded with a hollow look, somehow, like she was trying to avert her

eyes from reality as she said, “I believe some of the demon beasts may, of course, prove debilitated from being bathed in this much ritual energy, but...I believe we can only assert that we prioritized human life.”

“Suppose so... We did our best to keep the damage to a minimum. Right, Kirasaka?”

“I...I’d rather you didn’t include me in ‘we’ here!”

When Kojou prompted Sayaka for agreement, she leaped to her feet, glaring back at him.

“Minimal?! Why did you have to smash buildings to drive the demon beasts here, anyway?!”

Upon saying this, Sayaka pointed at the sorry sight of Demon Beast Park’s interior. It looked like a war zone. The beautiful, green-filled plaza was gouged out; the aquarium building was half-destroyed. Canals were buried in sand, and virtually nothing past the entry gate had escaped unscathed.

Of course, it was Kojou’s Beast Vassal that had inflicted such a calamity, having engaged in a little too much enthusiasm midway through herding the berserk demon beasts.

“The Beast Vassals are too strong, so I couldn’t help it! I was trying as hard as I could, you know!”

Sayaka shot him a reproachful glare, and Kojou desperately offered a rebuttal. Though it was regrettable that the park had been destroyed as a result, the demon beasts might have inflicted even greater damage if Kojou hadn’t used his Beast Vassal.

“I suppose so. Given senpai’s involvement, we should think it most fortunate that the damage was limited to this...,” Yukina said, sounding like she was struggling to convince herself that was true.

Sayaka took firm hold of Yukina’s shoulders with a worried expression. “Yukina, this man is brainwashing you! This is horrible damage by any normal standard! You’ve just been desensitized!”

“Whaddaya mean *desensitized*?! It was an emergency situation, no matter

how you slice it...!”

“I’m not the bad guy here,” Kojou insisted, asserting his own innocence.

A moment later, Kojou and the others heard a serene voice, in polar contrast to the heated argument between them.

“Truly, you are an even more frightening person than I had heard, Fourth Primogenitor... Even if it was to bring the demon beast rampage to a halt, to think you would destroy Demon Beast Park without hesitation. It would seem this is your true nature.”

“It is not—!”

Don’t decide that all on your own, Kojou grumbled to himself, looking back to the voice’s source; at that point, his face tensed. A girl was standing there with black hair, a black school uniform, wielding a two-pronged spear.

“Kisaki—!”

“Perhaps I should offer thanks, even so? We were unable to prepare a countermeasure against the demon beasts running amok, after all. But because of you, we had enough time to evacuate the visitors.”

“Evacuate...?!”

Bewildered looks came over Kojou and the others as they glared at Kiriha.

The demon beast rampage had already been taken care of. There should have been no further reason to evacuate Blue Elysium. At the very least, it wasn’t necessary to escape from the demon beasts—

“In the first place, the coast guard has doubtlessly detected Leviathan’s approach. Arrangements had already been made, so the order to evacuate came out immediately. I recommend that you, too, evacuate before the harbor is overtaken by crowds.”

“Leviathan...?”

Kojou was even more confused by Kiriha’s words. *Run before Leviathan comes*, she was warning Kojou and the others. Her demeanor was as if she’d known from the very beginning that Leviathan would be attacking the island.

Yukina drew her silver spear, poising it so she could fight at any moment. Similarly, Sayaka took up her own combat posture. However, Kiriha made no move. She had no intention of engaging in combat. To the contrary, she looked like she was paying Kojou and the others genuine consideration.

“Wait. Why do the humans on Blue Elysium need to evacuate? The Kusuki-Elysée lab is here, right? Ain’t that where they’re controlling Leviathan from?”

“I suppose so... What of it?”

Kiriha lightly raised a single eyebrow as she bounced the question back at him. Her calm and composed act was grating on Kojou’s nerves as he asked:

“Why would Kusuki put Blue Ely in danger?! That’s messed up!”

“That is a misconception on your part, Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Huh...?”

“Kusuki is not controlling Leviathan. Riru is.”

“Riru?”

Kiriha’s unexpected reply instantly ground Kojou’s thought process to a halt.

“Wait... Wasn’t Riru Yume’s other personality, reproduced by a computer?”

“Ah, that conception is not necessarily mistaken...” Then Kiriha giggled, smiling in admiration. “Certainly, Yume Eguchi’s mind includes malicious portions she inherited from Lilith. Yet, they are incomplete, insufficient to be called an independent personality. What we call LYL is a support system derived solely from the wicked components of Yume’s mind.”

“Supporting with an incomplete personality... Then you’re saying that, in the end, Riru is still a part of Yume?”

Kojou recalled the words Riru had spoken back at the cottage. Yume had shoved all the icky stuff onto her, Riru had said. When he considered that Riru’s *behavior* was an artificially constructed second personality, the description didn’t seem wrong.

She was an artificial, incomplete soul composed solely of the malicious parts inside of Yume. And now, she had taken over Yume and was purportedly

controlling Leviathan.

“Certainly, destroying Kusuki-Elysée’s computers means Riru’s annihilation. I suppose you could think of it merely as one piece of Yume returning to her, but to Riru, it is no different than death.”

“If she understands that, why is Riru attacking Blue Ely?”

Kojou started to feel irritated about how they were talking around each other.

She’d said it was Riru, not Kusuki, controlling Leviathan. Well, that was no big deal. In the first place, Riru had been created as a tool for controlling Leviathan. If he closed his eyes to the problem of her being an AI composed solely of wickedness, Riru running Leviathan didn’t even count as an emergency.

But her attacking Blue Elysium didn’t make any logical sense. After all, if the Kusuki-Elysée lab was destroyed in Leviathan’s attack, Riru herself would be annihilated with it.

Kiriha gazed with deep interest at the befuddled Kojou, but finally, she’d had her fill and voiced a reply. “Because that is what Riru desires.”

“What...?”

“She wants to be completely erased from the world. That is Riru’s—no, Yume Eguchi’s wish. After all, Yume Eguchi has endured many hardships, thanks to the power of the World’s Mightiest Succubus awakening within her.”

That’s crazy, Kojou nearly murmured, but then he suddenly remembered: “*That will make everyone hate you—*” Riru had definitely spoken those words to him, since Riru’s other half, Yume, had already gone through that experience.

“For instance, even now, both of Yume Eguchi’s parents, and her classmates, are in a hospital, in comas. The cause of this is Yume Eguchi’s succubus power running amok to protect her from their abuse.”

Satisfied that Kojou had fallen silent, Kiriha continued:

“Yume Eguchi surely reproached herself very deeply for this. She no doubt thought of taking her own life several times. However, she could not permit herself to die. Do you comprehend the reason?”

“...You don’t mean...because Yume, Lilith...?”

It was Yukina who let out a murmur. Kiriha nodded slightly at her answer.

“Correct. If Yume Eguchi dies, the power of Lilith she possesses shall no doubt be inherited by another suitable person somewhere else in the world. To prevent another child from repeating the same misfortune, Yume Eguchi could not choose death. It is childish self-sacrifice, but laudable at the same time.”

With that, Kiriha lowered her eyes. Her tone was cold, but Kiriha was likely honoring Yume’s strength of will in her own way.

“However, if she dies inside of Leviathan, that is a different story. Leviathan, a living weapon of the gods, is covered with a powerful demonic energy barrier. Without a physical body, Lilith’s soul would be unable to pass outside the barrier, and it would finally be absorbed by Leviathan and vanish altogether.”

“...You’re saying Yume planned to pick the place where she’d die? She meant to die inside that thing from the beginning—?!”

Kojou’s voice shook as a wave of anger with no outlet ripped through him. Finally, Kojou understood what Yume’s final words meant.

“I’m going to end it all...”

She certainly was trying to end it all: not just her own life, but the eternal chain of loss from the reincarnation of Lilith’s soul—

“It is doubtful Yume Eguchi is consciously aware of this, hence why she attempted to escape together with Sayaka Kirasaka. But Riru knows. Riru is cooperating with Kusuki-Elysée to fulfill Yume’s subconscious wish.”

“So that’s what this is... That’s why you woke up Riru’s personality back then, to get Yume back from the cottage.”

“Yes, precisely. That is why I said the same thing then: I seek no conflict with any of you.”

Kiriha made a pained smile as she pointed the two-pronged tip of her spear toward Yukina.

Certainly, Kiriha’s words were accurate. She was not Yume’s enemy. Kiriha’s actions had been to fulfill Yume’s wish.

However, whether Kojou and the others could forgive where those actions led

was another matter entirely.

“Leviathan is already under Riru’s control. And she is coming to attack Blue Elysium to annihilate herself—to annihilate LYL. After all, LYL is part of Yume Eguchi, who wishes every part of herself dead.”

Kiriha turned her gaze toward the sea as she spoke. They could not yet see Leviathan. Yet, they keenly felt the oppressive presence of the enormous living weapon beyond the horizon, which seemingly made it hard to breathe.

“And what happens to Yume if Riru is destroyed?”

“Without LYL’s support, Yume Eguchi’s succubus power cannot be drawn out stably. It shall surely be difficult to retain control over Leviathan. Once outside her control, Leviathan shall sleep at the bottom of the sea once more. It would be good if the main isle of Itogami Island suffered no damage in the meantime, but...”

“With Yume inside its belly, you mean...?! Like I’m gonna let that happen!”

Kojou glared and shouted at Kiriha, who stood right before him, blocking his path. Now that he understood Yume’s goal, he had to bring her back without a single moment to spare. Every second speaking to Kiriha there was a second wasted.

With Kojou in a hurry to go, Kiriha stared at him with a look of astonishment and asked, “You intend to stop Leviathan? Your opponent is a living weapon from the Age of the Gods.”

“Hah,” spat out Kojou, smiling ferociously. “Like I care. If I’m gonna call myself somethin’ stupid like the World’s Mightiest Vampire but can’t cut it at a time like this, I’d be one hell of a laughingstock!”

“I see... Then, I shall pass this on to you.”

Kiriha fished a key holder out of her uniform’s pocket, tossing it to Kojou. Kojou caught it by reflex. It was a very mundane key holder, with a very mundane key attached to it.

“This is...?”

“The key to Kusuki-Elysée’s private high-speed ship. The dock’s door is open.”

Kiriha explained in an unemotional tone. The gift from a most unlikely source made Kojou forget his caution as he looked back at Kiriha, dumbfounded.

“You’re not gonna stop us?”

“I am not conceited enough to think I can stop the Fourth Primogenitor in close combat,” Kiriha said, albeit in jest.

Kojou cursed under his breath. “I suppose I should thank you for this?”

“I expect no such thing. Though, I must say, having the Fourth Primogenitor owe me is quite amusing.”

“Like hell. Half our problems here are your own doing!”

Glaring as he spoke, Kojou turned his gaze to the back of Demon Beast Park. According to the map Asagi found, the ship was at a dock at the end of the cape farther ahead.

“Senpai, please wait—”

However, just as Kojou was set to run off, Yukina suddenly called him to a stop from behind. As she faced Kiriha, an anguished expression came over Yukina. It was as if a difficult choice had been thrust upon her.

“Himeragi...?”

“Listen to me, senpai. Kiriha’s objective in handing that key over to you is—”

Kiriha’s cheek twitched slightly at the mention of her name, however—

“Go, Yukina.”

It was Sayaka who interrupted Yukina’s voice with those words. Having already returned Lustrous Scale to sword form, Sayaka pointed its tip toward Kiriha.

“But, Sayaka...!”

“I know. I’ll handle this. Take care of Yume Eguchi. Go, and save her—”

Yukina was about to say something, but she held back the instant her and Sayaka’s eyes met. *Understood*, conveyed the silent fall of Yukina’s eyes. She rushed to Kojou’s side.

“Let us be off, senpai.”

“R-right.”

Kojou remained at a loss as he nodded and ran off, with Yukina right behind him.

For a time, Kiriha and Sayaka silently watched the two with neutral expressions on their faces.

“What a pity, Sayaka Kirasaka. You would have saved me a great deal of trouble had you gone with them...” Kiriha broke into a bitter smile. “Hmph.”

The tip of the spear she wielded made a tiny shudder, like a tuning fork’s. Its resonance washed over her, amplifying her ritual energy.

“You handed Kojou Akatsuki the key to that ship because that man going wild here and smashing Riru is inconvenient for you, isn’t it?” Sayaka asked after sighing. She surveyed Demon Beast Park, half-turned into a ruin.

If Kojou had challenged Kiriha to battle, there was every chance his summoned Beast Vassals would run wild and that Riru would be caught up in it. Kiriha was afraid of that. After witnessing the pathetic state of Demon Beast Park, she keenly empathized with Kiriha’s wariness.

“Yume Eguchi hates herself. Of course, that applies to Riru, a part of Yume. That’s why she’ll come attack this island—to ensure Riru is annihilated, yes? Put another way, if someone else destroys Riru first, she won’t have any reason to attack this island anymore.”

Sayaka glared at the Kusuki-Elysée lab as she spoke. If saving Blue Elysium was the only goal, destroying Riru would be sufficient.

However, if they destroyed Riru, and Leviathan returned to the bottom of the sea, they’d forever lose their chance to rescue Yume.

That was why Yukina couldn’t tell Kojou to use his Beast Vassals and destroy Riru.

Kiriha poised her spear and advanced a step.

“I suppose so. Hence, I have remained behind—to protect Riru.”

“That makes it simple, then. I will wipe the floor with you here and smash Riru to bits.”

Likewise, Sayaka narrowed the gap between them.

The first time they’d met, Kiriha had launched a surprise attack; this time, Sayaka knew what was up her opponent’s sleeve. The conditions were equal. She couldn’t allow herself to lose to the same opponent twice.

By sending Kojou and Yukina off to rescue Yume, Sayaka had made it her job to destroy Riru. For the sake of that goal, she had to defeat Kiriha then and there.

“This time I shall show no mercy, Shamanic War Dancer—”

“You’re going to be embarrassed at having said those words when you lose, Priestess of the Six Blades.”

The two lobbed insults back and forth as they approached each other.

Between them, all was silent, as if the flow of time itself had momentarily halted.

Then, an instant later, their ritual energy collided. The resulting roar echoed across the fresh ruin of Demon Beast Park.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE SWORD OF
JUDGMENT

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SWORD OF JUDGMENT

1

The boat was moored in a very obvious place. Painted one part white and one part blue, it was a twin-hulled ship that just seemed like it would move quickly. The hull was bigger than Kojou had expected, probably close to twenty meters long.

There was no sign of Kusuki-Elysée staff nearby, perhaps having evacuated during the chaotic demon beast rampage. With no one to interfere, Kojou and Yukina easily arrived at the ship's pilothouse.

Kojou turned to Yukina, standing behind him, and said, "Himeragi, please, stay on the island. We've gotten this far. I can do the rest on my own."

At that rate, if he went after Yume, the chances of having to face Leviathan head-on were high. The opponent was an enormous living weapon. A careless approach with a warship, let alone a private civilian ship, would get someone sunk in an instant. Kojou might have been immortal, but he could not expose an unprotected Yukina to such danger.

She shook her head obstinately. "We're going together. After all, I cannot allow you to go alone, senpai."

"Well, that ain't happening! I might have the World's Mightiest Demon Beast attacking me. It's too dangerous!"

"I am the observer of the World's Mightiest Vampire, you know."

For some reason, Yukina proudly lifted up her chin.

"Er, no, not even when you put it that way." Kojou was utterly bewildered.

Yukina suddenly said in a serious tone, "What would you do without me if the

ship did sink? It's not like you can swim."

"I—I never said I couldn't swim, dammit! I'm just a little bad at it!"

"And who looked after you when you were seasick, senpai?"

"Himeragi—!"

Yukina smiled teasingly as Kojou glared. Yukina looked straight into his eyes and said in all sincerity:

"Please, senpai. Let me come with you."

For a moment, Kojou was taken aback by the desperate look on Yukina's face. He got weak in the knees when she stared at him with that oddly forthright expression.

"—Do what you want, geez."

"Yes. So I shall."

Kojou averted his eyes like a sore loser. Yukina watched him, grinning with apparent relief.

Kojou took his cell phone out of a waterproof case and dialed Asagi's number. Naturally, taking the helm of a high-speed, twenty-meter ship was well beyond someone with no nautical knowledge like Kojou. He really had no choice but to lean on her.

"Yes, yes, hello?"

Asagi's reply came slightly delayed. Her voice seemed oddly hard-pressed, like she was right in the middle of something. Kojou felt like he could hear the sound of a keyboard being tapped ceaselessly on the other side of the phone call.

"Asagi, we've reached the ship. The power's on, too."

"Sorry, Kojou. I ran into a real troublemaker, so my hands are full. I'll send a guide over and you'll have to do the rest, okay?"

"...Ah, er?"

Whaddaya mean by that? he would have asked, but the connection dropped from her end before he could even get the words out.

“*Keh-keh.*” Kojou, standing stiff, heard the oddly laughing voice through the cell phone in his hand. On the GPS receiver screen for the high-speed ship’s pilot seat, he saw an odd icon displayed that somehow resembled a malicious teddy bear. It took over the ship’s autopilot, starting the engine up on its own.

“You’re...right, you’re Asagi’s partner...”

“*Mogwai. Due to circumstances, this isn’t my proper appearance, but oh well. Pleasure doing business with ya.*”

The voice came from the teddy bear icon, laughing with another “*Keh-keh*” as if to mock Kojou’s and Yukina’s constrained reactions.

Having distanced itself from the pier, the high-speed ship smoothly turned inside the harbor and began to accelerate, steadily kicking up white sea spray in the process. The comical tone annoyed Kojou, but Mogwai’s driving skills were apparently very sound. However, his driving was high-handed, with zero regard for fuel efficiency or the passengers’ sentiments. The fierce swaying of the hull wracked Kojou with the sudden urge to vomit.

Somehow, he kept the dizziness at bay as the voyage continued for another five minutes when he sensed Yukina, looking outside through a window, her breath stopping in her throat.

“Senpai, that’s—”

“An island...? Was there one in this direction...?”

In the direction Yukina was pointing, there was an ultramarine mass on the surface of the sea. As the high-speed ship approached, it loomed large enough to blot out the horizon.

Kojou suspected he was looking at an unfamiliar island when Yukina stared at him with a hard expression and stated:

“No, that is likely Leviathan.”

“...Are you serious...?! That’s a little *too* big, ain’t it?!”

The all-too-surreal feeling made Kojou let out a hollow laugh. He might have comprehended the words *four kilometers in length*, but seeing it with his own two eyes was a far ruder shock. He’d heard it was just as much of a living

creature as they were, but it just didn't feel real. Without exaggeration, it was the difference between an ant and a whale. They were just on completely different scales.

Furthermore, he could see no sign of the submarine Yume was on anywhere around Leviathan.

"Mogwai, where's Yume?"

"If you mean the Kusuki-Elysée sub, looks like it's inside of the big guy."

"It's inside? We couldn't catch up in time—?!"

Mogwai's blunt reply sent Kojou staring up at Leviathan's massive frame with a despondent feeling.

"Can't you at least figure out which part Yume's in? If we can't tell the place, we'll have to go lookin' for her inside that monster's belly—!"

"Keh-keh... I'd love to tell you that I have no idea, but... Nah, I can tell you where the submarine Yotaka is. Riru is connected to it, after all."

"That's right, data's passing between it and the lab... So that's where Yume is...?!"

"If she wasn't gobbled up and digested."

"Hey, don't jinx it!!" Kojou yelled, scowling at the icon on the GPS receiver.

Chances were that the *Yotaka* had a machine inside it that had been built as part of LYL. If they followed the signal between pieces of the system, they'd be able to roughly estimate the submarine's position. Yume had to be nearby.

"Please bring the ship alongside as close to Yume's position as you can, Mogwai," Yukina requested, seemingly on behalf of Kojou's feelings.

Without being able to submerge, the high-speed ship couldn't go into Leviathan's body. If they were to rescue Yume, they had to abandon ship and get aboard Leviathan. It meant they'd have no means of returning to Blue Elysium, but it couldn't be helped. Getting to Yume's location was the top priority.

"That's easier said than done, Li'l Sword Shaman Miss. One little move by the

big guy and you'll be tasting a big wave right out of the legends... Well, I'll give it a shot."

Following Mogwai's attempted scare, the ship's wheel turned. The bow pointed toward the sea's surface, right in front of Leviathan. That point, which seemed like its enormous torso, was apparently where the submarine with Yume aboard went inside.

As if sensing Kojou and the others approaching, the head of Leviathan slowly moved. To the monster, it was little more than a tiny stir, but that movement stirred up a ferocious whirlpool on the surface of the water. What seemed like an impregnable wall of high waves battered the high-speed ship over and over.

"Guoh...!"

Astride a cresting wave, the high-speed ship's hull danced in the air, toying with Kojou and the others. The ship's propulsion gave off a strange noise; the hull contorted, apparently struck by a wave. Considering the force of the impact, it was a miracle they didn't capsize.

Leviathan unleashed a wave of dense demonic energy that warped the air itself. Taking the brunt of it at point-blank range, Kojou yelled at the top of his lungs. He didn't feel any direct pain from it, but the noise in his head felt like fingernails scratching glass.

"Ugh... What's with this creepy feeling?!"

"A demonic energy pulse—! Leviathan is probably using the echo to assess the surrounding area!"

Yukina spoke while deftly employing Snowdrift Wolf to defend herself alone. Kojou scowled, the demonic energy pulse still ringing in his ears as he said:

"You mean like a dolphin using sonar to search for food...?"

"Keh-keh... That means the big guy noticed we're here, doesn't it?"

"—?!"

Mogwai's blunt warning made both Kojou and Yukina catch their breath.

The surface of the sea parted, making way for the emergence of the part of Leviathan's all-too-huge body they might call the dorsal fin. On the surface of

that fin, covering an area on par with a crude oil tanker, a number of deep holes opened up, each resembling the blowhole of a whale. The ultramarine scales around them lit up like electrical circuits, one after another. Dazzling, glimmering demonic energy coalesced inside the holes, almost like giant cannonballs being loaded—

“Wait a sec... Don’t tell me those are cannons?!”

Kojou’s voice went shrill as he detected an off-the-charts amount of demonic energy charging up. If something like that fired, surely no trace of Kojou, Yukina, or the ship would remain. Worst case, even Blue Elysium might sink with a single shot. The vile armament brought no shame upon the title of World’s Mightiest Living Weapon.

All those countless gun ports were trained upon a single, puny high-speed ship.

With an explosive roar, the unleashed beams instantly vaporized a vast amount of sea water, enveloping them in a huge outpouring of steam as they fell toward Kojou and Yukina’s ship.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

Yukina, standing on the bow of the high-speed ship, poured all her ritual energy into the thrust of her spear.

The onslaught of Leviathan’s demonic cannonballs arrived moments later.

The glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect emitted by the spear nullified the demonic cannonballs’ explosive demonic energy, slicing apart the mighty barrage. The purging spear, able to slay even a vampire primogenitor, could rival even a living weapon from the Age of the Gods.

The light of the demonic cannonballs winked out, and the shock wave rocked the hull of the high-speed ship. But the ship itself was safe. Yukina’s split-second decision had saved both the ship and Kojou.

“Himeragi! Are you all right?!”

“Yes. Somehow... Apparently, demonic energy was concentrated and fired like some kind of beam. The power was extravagant, but...”

Yukina was breathing hard, down on one knee on the deck. Of course she was exhausted; she'd defended them against an attack from Leviathan all by herself.

But the attacks showed no sign of relenting. Leviathan was shifting to the next onslaught. Things resembling little fish had been launched from some submerged part of Leviathan's enormous body.

Their number had to be over a hundred.

The little fish left white, frothing waves behind them as they bore down on the high-speed ship with incredible force. Their underwater movements were unerringly forward, like torpedoes assaulting an enemy warship.

Even "little" fish had to be taken in the context of Leviathan's size. Each individual one was no smaller than Kojou and Yukina's ship. If they exploded at point-blank range, there was no way they'd emerge unscathed.

"Senpai!"

"Torpedoes this time, geez—!"

Yukina looked back, her face pale; Kojou nervously gritted his teeth. Snowdrift Wolf could only nullify demonic energy. It was useless against living torpedoes formed of actual matter.

"Shit! C'mon over, Sadalmelik Albus!"

Backed into a corner, Kojou summoned a Beast Vassal as his last resort. There was no doubt the vast demonic energy scattered about by a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor would antagonize Leviathan further, but Kojou, well aware of that, had no other cards left to play.

He had summoned a sea monster—a transparent Undine seemingly made up of flowing water. Her top half was a beautiful woman; the lower half, a giant serpent. Her flowing hair was formed of countless snakes.

The living torpedoes thrust forward as one, their acceleration turning the middle of the sea into a raging torrent. Talons protruding from slender hands mowed the living torpedoes down one after another, wiping them out without even permitting them to detonate.

The watery maiden's ability was restoration and regeneration. It could return

any object to a previous state—even before it had ever been created. It was a healing power destructive enough to return all to nothingness.

Protected by the water maid, the high-speed ship broke through the horde of living torpedoes, drawing nearer to Leviathan. Seeming to be hungry for results, Leviathan unleashed a new attack.

Blue silhouettes—too many to count—were launched toward the sky from the living weapon’s enormous frame. They traced vivid parabolic arcs and accelerated toward the surface of the sea. The sight made Kojou imagine a flock of seagulls suddenly flying up from the back of a whale.

But these were no seagulls pouring down onto the sea’s surface. The high-speed, flying, living missiles created huge pillars of water wherever they exploded.

“Anti-ship missiles?! Now they’re coming by air! These living weapons from the Age of the Gods have something for everyone!”

The ceaseless downpour of living missiles seemed to have a large amount of explosive liquid packed in. If he shot them down willy-nilly, the fluid would scatter around the area and do damage on its own.

That didn’t mean he could just sit on his hands and watch—

“Ugh... C’mon over, Natra Cinereus—!”

Kojou summoned a second Beast Vassal. The shelled beast, enveloped by mist, turned the approaching living missiles into mist one after another, dissipating them.

Even so, Leviathan’s attacks did not cease. With no letup in the onslaught of the living torpedoes and missiles, even the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals were forced on the defensive.

If they continued to bathe in such concentrated fire, it was only a matter of time until sheer numbers overwhelmed them.

“Shit, no choice! Regulus Aurum!”

Kojou called forth yet another Beast Vassal.

The goal of his attack was to divert Leviathan’s attention. Surely even the

World's Mightiest Demon Beast could not sustain an attack from the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals and simply ignore it.

The lightning lion, shrouded by explosive electrical currents, transformed into a thunderbolt and assaulted Leviathan. "Gyuaaaaaa—!" came the scream-like roar that rent the air; the lightning turned the surface of the sea gold.

This was the Beast Vassal that had once blithely scorched one of the four gigafloats that constituted Itogami Island. However, against Leviathan, letting it run a bit wild wasn't a problem. Indeed, the less Kojou had to worry about holding it back, the easier it became to manage the beast.

The pale beam enveloped Leviathan's enormous frame, thoroughly scorching its long, huge tail.

However, Leviathan's movements did not change. It continued leisurely floating, seemingly heedless of the Beast Vassal's attack.

"—No effect?!"

"It is protected by a demonic energy wall...", Yukina calmly stated in response to Kojou's shocked words.

"Wall? You mean, like a barrier...?"

"Yes. Furthermore, an extremely powerful one. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor are nominally able to punch through it, but—"

"The demonic energy wall dampens the power so much that they can't actually roast that huge thing, huh...?"

Kojou cursed under his breath.

Where Leviathan had sustained a direct impact from the Beast Vassal, there was a scar from the attack carved about ten meters deep. That would have been fatal enough against any normal demon beast, but to Leviathan's enormous frame, such damage was no more than a scratch on its back.

"We're...not getting anywhere against this thing from the outside."

Kojou looked half-exasperated as he analyzed the situation. On top of a body so huge it was off the scale, it had a stout demonic energy shield as well. Kojou couldn't even be sure a direct strike with a nuclear warhead would be enough

to defeat such a difficult foe.

Yukina seemed to turn serious as she concurred.

“Either way, we cannot bring Yume back unless we go inside, can we?”

There was one kilometer left between them and Leviathan. But it seemed impossible to get the ship there in one piece.

“Mogwai, is Yume really in there?!”

Kojou yelled at the GPS receiver screen.

The malicious teddy bear icon laughed in an irresponsible, very human-sounding voice.

“Keh-keh, sorry. Either way, the helm’s not working. You’re on a collision course—!”

As he spoke, the ship accelerated farther. Going to ramming speed was reckless, but if they didn’t, they’d never be able to get through the choppy sea around Leviathan.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Yukina, standing at the prow of the ship once more, held her spear as she danced. Eyes closed, the thick demonic energy wall deployed around Leviathan loomed before her. So long as they could not breach that wall, they could not reach Leviathan. If the ship smashed into the wall, the ship would surely be smashed to sawdust.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Snapping her eyes open, Yukina flashed her silver spear.

Her Snowdrift Wolf was a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency able to nullify demonic energy and rend any barrier. It tore through even Leviathan’s invincible demonic energy wall with ease, slicing open a path for the high-speed ship.

“—C’mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury!”

Fast approaching Leviathan, Kojou summoned a fourth Beast Vassal in its

direction.

The quicksilver, twin-headed dragon was a Dimension Eater, able to consume the space of any dimension. Its enormous maws tore into Leviathan's stout scales, gouging out a cavity extending into its body.

And then, enveloped by seawater, the high-speed ship Kojou and Yukina were aboard plunged into Leviathan's interior.

Having lost sight of its foe, the gargantuan demon beast unleashed a ferocious, seemingly maddened roar.

It shuddered with the anger of the very sea, a sight to frighten the world itself.

2

Meanwhile, Asagi Aiba was shut inside the girls' room at the cottage, continuing to tap at her keyboard.

There was a thin coat of sweat on her glossy skin, for once bereft of makeup. The corners of her tightly pursed lips twitched in visible displeasure. The war was not going well.

Or rather, it was rich with the color of defeat.

"We've breached the relay server's firewall, li'l miss. I gave tossing some viruses up to counterhack a try, but it'll probably buy thirty seconds, tops."

Mogwai explained in a carefree voice as if it was someone else's problem. Asagi's cheeks sullenly puffed up as she said:

"Figures that Tanker's a tough one. How many proxies do we have left on hand?"

"Twelve thousand left. We're being totally crushed on attack speed, huh? Li'l Tanker Miss is trying to access every traffic control system on Itogami Island."

"She's trying to steal capacity from you?! That's hitting below the belt!"

Tanker's merciless attack unnerved Asagi.

Mogwai, Asagi's partner, was really a set of five supercomputers in the possession of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Its proper function was maintaining and administrating Itogami Island. From electricity, water, traffic control, and waste disposal to even the temperature of air conditioners—without Mogwai, the artificial isle of Itogami Island would be unable to maintain even basic city services.

As a part-time employee of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, Asagi held the special right to quietly borrow part of Mogwai's surplus functionality for personal purposes. Put another way, if there was no surplus functionality, she could not borrow Mogwai's power.

Knowing this, Tanker had launched attacks on Itogami Island's traffic control systems. Diverting Mogwai's attention meant robbing Asagi of combat resources.

If Asagi overused Mogwai in spite of that, Itogami Island's traffic control would be paralyzed; worst case, innocent citizens would wind up in traffic accidents as a result. In other words, Asagi would be taking Itogami Island hostage. To Asagi, already critically short on fighting strength, it was far too large a handicap.

"At this rate, it's only a matter of time until your embarrassing poems are leaked, li'l miss. What'll you do?"

Mogwai, now reduced to little more than a paperweight, inquired without a hint of responsibility. Asagi tossed her hair back in annoyance.

"I said already, I haven't written any poems...!"

"Keh-keh, maybe it'll be those drab pictures from when you were younger..."

"Don't call them drab! Okay, yes, I was a bit plainer than I am now, but...!"

Asagi moaned, clutching her head as she remembered herself in black hair and plain glasses before meeting Kojou. She hadn't thought it hideous or anything, but in hindsight, she found it acutely embarrassing.

"Finally thinking about throwing in the towel, empress? An honorable warrior knows when to yield with grace."

“I’m not a warrior, I’m just a high schooler working part-time—!”

Asagi listlessly rebuffed Tanker’s advice.

“Besides, there’s no reason to throw a match I’m gonna win anyway.”

“At this stage, such bluster is a farce. Empress, I am guessing that thou art the type lacking real experience with men but who pretends to have plenty so that thou need not speak the truth?”

“You’re just an elementary school brat, so don’t run your mouth like you know—!” Asagi screamed, her face unwittingly turning red. Mogwai’s statement hitting the mark riled her up even more. Then there was also the problem that she had no chance of victory in straight-up combat. Maybe she would against the average hacker, but she was facing Lydianne Didier. After all, she was a genius, a superelite raised at the giant conglomerate Didier Heavy Industries, dispatched to Itogami Island to test a robot tank—

That’s it, thought Asagi, the corners of her lips curling up in delight.

“Mogwai, burn up the rest of the proxies. Just hold for a minute and thirty seconds.”

“Keh-keh... You finally sound like yourself again, li’l miss.”

Mogwai laughed as if he could read Asagi’s mind. If he was concentrating solely on defense, even Mogwai, now robbed of most of his available functionality, could manage somehow.

Tanker sighed in apparent dismay at Asagi and Mogwai being sore losers and moved to launch one final attack.

“’Tis futile to harden thy defenses at this late stage. I shall simply surround and crush y—”

But she let out a *y—naa!* sound in surprise.

Suddenly, like a receding wave, the alert notices burying Asagi’s computer screen vanished. Tanker’s attack had halted. No, rather, she’d been robbed of the ability to attack—

In contrast, Asagi’s counterattack had breached Tanker’s defenses, bringing the system on the other end crashing down.

Having lost all her security, Tanker no longer had any combat resources with which to continue the fight. She was practically naked.

“—Th-this attack is from empress?! From Neustria?”

Tanker’s voice tumbled out as she finally realized where Asagi’s hack had come from.

Neustria was a province of the North Sea Empire, a city-state located on the western edge of the European continent. It was a small country that produced precision machinery and weapon systems, and was also Lydianne Didier’s birthplace.

And it was not through the Kusuki-Elysée lab Tanker administrated that Asagi had attacked her, but through Neustria.

Tanker had yet to realize what that meant.

“Whew... I almost broke a sweat. No wonder they call you an interceptor, Tanker—your defenses are really something. If there wasn’t a hole in your security, even I would’ve been in trouble.”

Asagi stretched atop the bed as she spoke. Her words rocked Tanker. She was still only an elementary schooler; it probably hadn’t sunk in yet how she’d gone from an overwhelming advantage to her own defeat.

“Absurd... My system cannot have been so fragile...”

“Is that so?”

Asagi smiled wryly and shook her head.

“You’re one of Didier Heavy Industries’ elite children, their pride and joy. That robot tank you’re holed up in is a Didier prototype, too, isn’t it?”

“...Dost thou sayeth, thou took over the Didier Heavy Industries computers and used them as a stepping stone? ’Tis a manufacturer of military machinery?!”

“Easier than attacking the Kusuki-Elysée server with you protecting it tooth and nail,” Asagi bluntly declared to a shocked Tanker.

The robot tank Tanker used was a Didier Heavy Industries prototype. The data gleaned from field testing was regularly transmitted back to Didier Heavy

Industries. Asagi's target was the private communications channel used for that purpose.

If she could take over Didier Heavy Industries' computers, breaking into the robot tank was simple. Of course, that meant busting through the security of a major military supplier, but that was no great feat where Asagi was concerned.

"Empress...from the beginning, thou aimed not at LYL, but at my Hizamaru...!"

Tanker spoke in a tone like she'd been slapped. Hizamaru had to be the name of her tank. And that Hizamaru was now completely under Asagi's control. Tanker couldn't get out of the tank of her own volition, let alone engage in hacking.

"Don't blame me... You're the one who picked a fight with me. Thanks to you, I can get to LYL through the front door. As a warrior's mercy, I won't send all of your poems out."

Later, concluded Asagi, muting the conversation with Tanker.

The unexpected interference had cost her time, but Asagi still had the original job—taking over LYL—left to do.

"Keh-keh... Incidentally, li'l miss, what's with this program?"

Having finally regained its proper abilities, Mogwai asked in its usual, humanlike voice.

Mogwai's interest had been piqued by the new firewall-breaching app Asagi had used in her attack on Tanker. However, Asagi seemed annoyed at the application, blithely deleting it.

"Ahh, that. I thought that the existing attack algorithms weren't gonna cut it for hacking, so I slapped something together on the spot. I think its general practicality might go up with a little more improvement, though..."

"So you made someone else handle plain defense while you did something interesting like that...?"

"What are you complaining about? This is what a support AI's for, sheesh."

Asagi and Mogwai casually shot the breeze with each other. To the two of them, this was normal, everyday business. Yet, Tanker—Lydianne Didier—was

in utter shock as she listened to the conversation from inside the immobilized tank.

The girl named Asagi Aiba was not aware of just how ridiculous her ability was. The application she'd slapped together on the spot was worth enough that the intelligence agencies of any nation on Earth would gladly kill to get it. She didn't even realize that.

"'Tis no mistake, empress... Thou art truly..."

Lydianne Didier wrapped her arms around her knees as she sadly murmured.

But her voice would reach Asagi no more.

3

"Mist Lynx—Twin Moons—!"

The twin-pronged spear, reminiscent of a tuning fork, thrust forward, seemingly carving out the air.

The spear was enveloped in a pseudo-spatial-severing ritual spell. It was an exceptionally high-level ritual that produced the very real effect of space being sliced apart. Originally, this was the ability of Sayaka's Lustrous Scale. Kiriha Kisaki's Ricercare had copied the formula.

"Lustrous Scale!"

However, Sayaka was not unnerved as she lashed out with her silver long sword.

The arc of the long sword created a virtual tear in space, creating an invulnerable defensive wall. The spatial-severing effect lasted but a single moment, but it was plenty to parry Kiriha's attack.

"Ricercare, amplifying ritual energy—it's certainly a troublesome weapon, but when you know what's coming, fending it off isn't all that difficult."

"...That goes the same for your Der Freischütz, does it not, Sayaka Kirasaka?"

Kiriha's frigid statement came as she re-poised her spear.

“And yet, your taking pride in such a trifling feat reveals much about your character. You are out of *shikigami* and cursed arrows, are you not? With your ritual energy depleted against the Fourth Primogenitor and the demon beasts, it is impossible for I, a Six Blades, to be bested.”

Sayaka could feel herself getting flustered over Kiriha’s venomous remarks.

“Thanks for the warning—but don’t look down on Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency,” she declared sarcastically.

The next instant, a deep fissure opened up along the ground at Kiriha’s feet. It was a spatial-severing counterattack with Lustrous Scale.

Sayaka unleashed slicing attacks one after another, leaving Kiriha no choice but to continue to evade backward. If Kiriha’s forked spear took a square hit from Lustrous Scale as it ripped space, it would be severed for certain. In the end, Ricercare’s ability was a copy—it could not best the real thing.

And Sayaka was merciless in her attacks on Kiriha.

When they had first met, Sayaka had hesitated to cut Kiriha down when she was unarmed. That was the downside of Lustrous Scale being too powerful, preventing Sayaka from drawing on her full strength. These circumstances were different, though. The lives of a great number of people visiting Blue Elysium hung in the balance.

If Kiriha was going to defend Riru, Sayaka had to defeat her.

Kiriha’s expression grew graver, almost as if Sayaka’s determination grated on her.

“The fact that Yume Eguchi has chosen death brings your mission to an end, Sayaka Kirasaka. You have no further reason to do battle with us, do you?”

“Oh, really? I guess this means you haven’t achieved your own objective yet?”

Sayaka smiled tauntingly as she spoke.

Kiriha’s expression vanished; her movements stopped. Apparently, Sayaka had hit the mark.

“Using Leviathan—a demon beast you should normally eradicate—to sink Blue Elysium is a method only the Bureau of Astrology would think of, but if that

happens, you being here means you won't escape unscathed, either. What reason does the Bureau of Astrology have to sink the island, even at the cost of a precious Six Blades?"

Sayaka posed the question in a quiet voice.

She hadn't been able to believe it until then, but having come this far, she had to accept it: The Bureau of Astrology seriously intended to sink Blue Elysium. But Sayaka still couldn't comprehend the reason why.

And perhaps thinking there was no longer any reason to hide it, Kiriha readily voiced her reply.

"The Bureau of Astrology's primary objective is to eliminate Asagi Aiba—"

"Huh?" Sayaka's voice dribbled out in complete stupor. "Asagi Aiba... Eh, *that* Asagi?! The beautiful girl in Kojou Akatsuki's class...?"

Sayaka, rocked to the core, even blurted out the private assessment she'd never meant to share.

Kiriha made no reply. Her silence told Sayaka that her words were not false.

"Why kill Asagi...?" Sayaka's voice trembled in bewilderment.

She would not have been surprised if they were after Kojou Akatsuki's life. That teenager was the Fourth Primogenitor, after all; the World's Mightiest Vampire, throwing the worldwide military balance off-kilter.

However, Asagi Aiba was a mere ordinary person. She couldn't wrap her head around how smashing a newly built artificial isle was connected to eliminating her alone. Moreover, Kiriha's combat capabilities should have allowed her to kill the girl at any moment.

Kiriha spoke a single sentence, as if that should answer every doubt Sayaka harbored.

"Asagi Aiba is the Priestess of Cain."

"Priestess of...Cain...?"

"You did not know your romantic rival's true nature, Shamanic War Dancer?" Then Kiriha giggled.

Sayaka was finally accustomed to her poison tongue, but that time, she could tell it had a tiny ring of genuine pity for Sayaka mixed in.

The pity was likely for Sayaka at having lost her rival in such an unsought manner, but—

“None of your business... And wait, whose romantic rival?!”

Kiriha continued to speak, heedless of Sayaka’s objections. “—The Priestess of Cain is the being that shall someday trigger The Cleansing. The Lion King Agency and the Gigafloat Management Corporation seem to intend to use Asagi Aiba, but the Bureau of Astrology thinks this to be dangerous.”

The government’s interior views were not a single monolith—certainly, that is what her words to Sayaka conveyed. Use the Priestess of Cain, or eliminate her; even the top Attack Mages in the government were split. That was the root cause behind the Lion King Agency and the Bureau of Astrology coming to blows.

“But how do you get from that to sinking Blue Elysium...?!”

“For we cannot kill Asagi Aiba so long as Itogami Island exists.”

“...Can’t kill her?”

Sayaka felt doubtful about Kiriha’s extravagant statement. Even if they called her this Priestess of Cain, Asagi Aiba’s flesh and blood was that of a normal human. How could a Bureau of Astrology Six Blades be unable to kill her?

However, Kiriha gently thrust the tip of her spear at her feet as she said, “Itogami Island, this Blue Elysium included, is an artificial city constructed in defiance of natural Providence. To Cain, a being cursed by solid earth, the isle itself is a single, giant altar. Everything upon this island is her ally. She shall be protected by any and all contrivances necessary to do so.”

“That’s absurd...!”

Sayaka was going to immediately fly into a rebuttal when she suddenly remembered something in a report she had previously set eyes upon—namely, that about one month before, at the height of the Wiseman’s Blood incident, Asagi Aiba had once perished, right before Yukina’s and Kojou Akatsuki’s eyes.

But she immediately returned to life by the hand of Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore.

This had been dismissed as pure chance, with no one harboring any doubt about the final outcome. But one could think of this as *She had been protected by a chance occurrence*.

“Itogami Island is a stage furnished for the sake of the Priestess of Cain. So long as she stands atop Itogami Island, no one can kill Asagi Aiba. Not even the Fourth Primogenitor, not even the Schneewaltzer—”

Kiriha’s unemotional explanation sent a chill up Sayaka’s spine. If even Snowdrift Wolf, able to slay a vampire primogenitor, could not kill her—did that mean Asagi Aiba was more of a monster than the Fourth Primogenitor?

“To kill Asagi Aiba, Itogami Island must first be destroyed. Therefore, the Sixth Branch established a plan to use Leviathan. Fortuitously, the chairman of Kusuki-Elysée arranged all the implements required to control Leviathan.”

Kiriha gave the half-destroyed Kusuki-Elysée lab a glance.

Both Yume Eguchi, the World’s Mightiest Succubus, and LYL, to draw out her power, had been provided by Kusuki-Elysée.

The Bureau of Astrology hadn’t lifted a finger. But they had whispered in the ear of one man, Kazuomi Kusuki, stirring his dream of controlling the World’s Mightiest Demon Beast into motion. Once he died, no evidence would remain.

“So after using Kusuki-Elysée like that, you’ll pin the whole crime on their shoulders.”

“I feel sorry for him. Though, when you think of what Kusuki meant to use Leviathan for, I believe it is just deserts?”

Kiriha shrugged her shoulders in the face of Sayaka’s reproachful gaze.

“In the first place, the Lion King Agency seems to have realized the Bureau of Astrology’s plan. Thanks to their bringing Asagi Aiba to Blue Elysium, we were able to remove the destruction of Itogami Island proper from our objectives. At this rate, if all goes well, the damage might be contained to a minimum.”

“...Unfortunately, that plan will fail.”

Sayaka exhaled, finding it all troublesome, somehow.

“Mm.” Kiriha furled her brows. “And why is that?”

“Because Kojou Akatsuki and Yukina are going to stop Leviathan and bring Yume Eguchi back. While we’re at it, I’m going to kick your ass and toss all you Bureau of Astrology higher-ups out on your butts for thinking up dumb stuff like this.”

“You speak loftily of goals beyond the capabilities of a mere Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency. I shall kill you—!”

Kiriha thrust her spear forward before she had even finished her threat.

Sayaka leaped to the right. Kiriha saw the move coming. Six Blades Spirit Sight: Like Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency, Kiriha was able to peer a moment into the future. Kiriha’s attack could not be avoided.

But Sayaka evaded that purportedly unavoidable attack. She had moved even faster than the future Kiriha could read.

“Shaking Cosmos/Judgment!”

Sayaka’s kick assailed Kiriha. Kiriha blocked it with the shaft of her spear, but the force of the explosive kick sent the guarding Kiriha flying.

“Wha...?!”

Kiriha cried out as her wrists went numb. Sayaka might have been blessed with a tall figure, but she was far from a bodybuilder. A kick from her slender leg shouldn’t have had the force to overwhelm Kiriha.

“That speed...! Physical enchantment?! How could it possibly be this str—”

“Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency are experts in curses and assassinations. Of course, that includes a thorough education in *how to curse yourself*.”

Sayaka stated it like it was nothing special. Physical enchantments were basic skills used by many Attack Mages to temporarily boost their physical strength and reaction speeds using ritual energy.

However, the rate of physical enhancement Sayaka had used far surpassed

the bounds of Kiriha's knowledge. Sayaka had woven a curse on herself so dangerous that the slightest lapse of control would cause her to destroy herself. Save for Shamanic War Dancers, experts in curses, such a tactic was beyond absurd.



“Sayaka Kirasaka! Are you saying you can move faster than Six Blades Spirit Sight—?!”

Kiriha’s counterattack did not connect. Even peering into the future, she could not catch up to Sayaka’s speed. “That’s not all, though,” said Sayaka, coldly shaking her head.

“There has to still be damage from when Yukina nailed you, Kiriha Kisaki. As you are now, I’d be one hundred to zero with you. Besides, it’s probably kicking in right about now?”

“—?!”

Kiriha’s spear fell from her hands. With a look of shock, Kiriha stared at her right hand, suddenly lacking all gripping power.

Kiriha’s right hand had taken the brunt of Sayaka’s kick, but that was not the cause. It had merely been the signal that had triggered the curse placed on it beforehand.

“A binding ritual... When did you—?! You have not even...touched me!”

Shamanic War Dancers were experts in curses and assassination. Knowing this, Kiriha had taken great pains to avoid being touched by Sayaka. Sayaka shouldn’t have had any opportunity to cast a curse on Kiriha.

“I suppose not. Not directly, anyway.”

As she spoke, Sayaka thrust her silver long sword into the ground. Seeing this, Kiriha drew in her breath a little.

“Contagion curse! You had a curse planted on the hilt of Der Freischütz from the beginning?!”

Kiriha had not been touched by Sayaka. But Kiriha had touched her sword. That, by itself, had cast Sayaka’s curse upon her. If Sayaka had been serious, she surely could have slain Kiriha via the curse then and there. It was Kiriha who had been shown mercy back then.

That fact was a great stain upon Kiriha’s pride.

“Black Thunder—!”

Kiriha leaped, her entire body brimming with her remaining ritual energy. Sayaka was not the only one who could use physical enchantments. Kiriha amplified her physical strength and reaction speed beyond her limits to unleash a killing blow. Kiriha's physical abilities were now Sayaka's equal. Even if she could not use her right arm, Kiriha was a Six Blades, an expert in hand-to-hand combat. Her victory was assured—

“Saturn/Saiha!”

—but Sayaka did not pick her long sword back up; instead, she lunged into Kiriha's flank. Then, she unleashed a blow to a vulnerable spot at point-blank range. Kiriha, already moving beyond her limits, could not fend off the blow.

“Eight Divine Generals School... The Lion King Agency's silent assassin technique...!”

Struck in her eardrum, Kiriha wrung out a painful-sounding voice.

“Did you think you could beat a Shamanic War Dancer in hand-to-hand? I'm an expert assassin, you know?”

Sayaka exhaled in exasperation.

In point of fact, there was no gap between her and Kiriha's combat abilities. Certainly, the damage she'd taken from Yukina was dragging her down, but Sayaka was more depleted still; nor was a Shamanic War Dancer's physical enchantment convenient enough to be used for a long period of time. Sayaka's show of superiority over Kiriha was all bluff, a tactical ploy.

But Sayaka's bluff had gotten to Kiriha, throwing her off her game.

Kiriha was an anti-demon beast combat expert. And Sayaka was an assassin...

Bluffs went nowhere with demon beasts, but they worked wonders against human opponents. Sayaka's victory over Kiriha had hinged on that single component: her having experience against opponents on whom such ploys actually worked.

“Certainly, my underestimating you seems to be my undoing, Sayaka Kirasaka. But you are too late. Even if you destroy Riru now, that can no longer stop Leviathan's attack—”

Though Kiriha discerned she had lost, she forced a faint smile out as she spoke.

“You might be right,” Sayaka admitted, her shoulders falling.

Over the distant horizon, she could already faintly make out Leviathan’s enormous shadow. Even if she destroyed Riru immediately, it didn’t mean that monster would just let Blue Elysium go.

“I enjoyed our bout, Sayaka Kirasaka. Thank you, for stopping me...”

That was the last Kiriha said before losing consciousness.

Even if it was her mission, perhaps even she had anguished over taking the lives of a great many innocent people. Somehow, Kiriha’s face seemed more at ease now that she had been relieved of the heavy burden of seeing Blue Elysium’s final moments through.

Sayaka felt a little envious at her satisfied demeanor as she said, “What’s this thank you... I’d rather you didn’t bury us all just yet!”

Dragging her tired body along, Sayaka walked toward the laboratory.

Sayaka hadn’t given up on destroying Riru.

Even if Kiriha had told her it wasn’t in time, she had a reason not to give in.

Sayaka wasn’t fighting alone. Kojou and Yukina were headed for Leviathan.

Though she didn’t doubt Leviathan’s magnitude, she still believed without a shadow of a doubt that they’d manage, somehow.

“...You’ve made even me believe in you, Kojou Akatsuki... You’d better pull this off!”

Sayaka subconsciously put a hand to her own neck as she murmured. Sayaka couldn’t help but believe in the teenage boy whose gut she’d stabbed with her sword, but who’d saved her nonetheless.

So Sayaka couldn’t give in. She had no reason to.

It wasn't long before Kojou and Yukina could tell that something had happened.

Along with a sense of deceleration, the pulses that had continued inside the living weapon at regular intervals came to a halt. All that remained was a gentle sway, as if floating on a wave—Leviathan had stopped swimming.

“Leviathan...stopped?” Kojou muttered, staring into the sky.

For her part, Yukina seemed bewildered as she surveyed the area.

They were inside Leviathan's interior cavern. It was a huge open space, resembling a hangar on an aircraft carrier—

It was unclear whether the gods had designed it that way or Leviathan had evolved in that fashion on its own, but Leviathan, a living weapon itself, came with a cavity for loading small-scale living weapons for its own defense.

However, in that moment, Kojou and Yukina were the space's only occupants.

The high-speed ship that had gotten them that far had been smashed when they broke into Leviathan's innards. The twin-hulled ship was split right down the middle, completely unable to sail farther.

Yukina, with her absurd reflexes, had come out largely unscathed, but Kojou had taken damage all over his body and looked on the verge of death. If possible, he would've loved some R & R to heal his wounds, but unfortunately there was no time for that.

Considering Leviathan's enormous frame, it was close enough to Blue Elysium, several kilometers removed, to reach out and touch the isle. They had to get Yume back before the World's Mightiest Demon Beast sank the subfloat.

With their backs against the wall, they were grateful for Leviathan's sudden halt, but it still felt eerie. Kojou was still bewildered, ignorant of the cause, when the cell phone in his pocket began to ring to announce an incoming call.

“Kojou, can you hear me?”

“Ah... Asagi?”

Kojou was a little surprised when he heard Asagi's voice over the communication app. Even though the sea's surface had nothing to obstruct

electromagnetic waves, it was still too far from shore. They should've been too far out for cell phones to be usable.

"I'm using that Yotaka sub as a relay. Sounds like you made it safe and sound."

"Yeah, somehow."

Kojou replied over the com channel, which seemed fairly laggy. His cut lip still hurt, but he could still handle a phone call. If Asagi was using the submarine's equipment, that suggested she'd finally managed a thorough hack of the Kusuki-Elysée laboratory.

"You took Riru over, Asagi?"

"Somehow. Kirasaka seems to have made it to the Kusuki-Elysée lab, too."

"That so."

He felt Yukina give off an air of relief now that she knew Sayaka was safe and sound. Sayaka had to have been run-down from firing curse arrows one after another, but she'd apparently managed to send Kiriha packing.

With this, he could finally make out a faint ray of hope for saving Blue Elysium. All that remained was for Kojou and Yukina to bring Yume back.

"At any rate, I've managed to make Leviathan behave for now. But I'm just pulling the wool over Riru's eyes so it might not last very long—at best, five, ten minutes?"

Asagi spoke with a faint twinge of nervousness. Kojou's expression grew graver still.

"So we'd better find Yume and get her out before then, huh."

"If I can't keep Riru pinned down on this end, I'll have Kirasaka take out the whole system. That should take away Leviathan's reason for attacking Blue Elysium, after all."

"Got it. That'd be good—"

The line cut out before Asagi even said *Leave it to me*. Apparently, Asagi's mind was so busy keeping Riru under wraps that she couldn't spare any of it even for talking over the phone.

“Let’s go, Himeragi. There’s no time.”

“Yes.”

Kojou dragged his painful body as he walked forward; Yukina followed without objection. Leviathan’s interior was too huge to settle everything in five minutes. There was no time to address Kojou’s wounds.

Yukina stepped on the hard, armor-like interior wall as she said, “I had imagined more of a living thing, but this truly is a weapon...”

It was dark inside Leviathan, but Kojou, being a vampire, had keen nocturnal vision. Yukina, with her spirit sight, apparently also had no trouble.

Leviathan’s interior gave off an air that was less simple life form, and more manufactured product with an organic-looking design, kind of like the hood of a sports car.

“Not looking very alive is kind of a saving grace. I don’t plan on eating eel for a while, though.”

Kojou grimaced as he recalled that Leviathan resembled a gargantuan serpent. Naturally, the thought of being in the monster’s belly gave him chills.

As he advanced into the gently curved cave, he could make out a faint light.

The source of the plainly artificial white glow was a submarine’s floodlight. A snow-white submarine was moored there, as if enshrined by Leviathan’s interior.

“Senpai...”

“Yeah... It’s that Kusuki-Elysée submarine, ain’t it...?”

Not bad, thought Kojou, internally thanking Mogwai for his precise directions.

The submarine’s identity was crystal clear even without the characters YOTAKA engraved into the hull. There was only one submarine that’d be sitting in a place like that.

The submarine’s hatch was open. Moving as if she weighed no more than a feather, Yukina leaped onto the submarine’s hull, calling out to Kojou as she peered in.

“Senpai. There’s someone inside...”

A middle-aged man wearing a blue diving suit was lying on the floor within. His eyes were firmly closed; the expression he wore looked like a man terrified of something.

“That Kusuki guy. Don’t tell me he’s...dead?”

Yukina shook her head at Kojou’s question.

“No, he would appear to be asleep. However, whether he will ever wake again is...”

“Either way, at this rate, he’ll die if we just...leave him like this...”

Why’d it have to be like this? Kojou put a hand over his eyes.

He couldn’t just let the guy die like that, but even so, he didn’t have any time to spare looking after him. He was the only one in the submarine. Yume was nowhere to be found.

Where’s Yume—? thought Kojou, shifting his gaze about.

Suddenly, he felt strange demonic energy surging behind his back.

“Senpai—!”

Yukina, reacting a moment quicker, tried to warn Kojou.

But it was too late. Before she could manage, a pitch-black whip reached out, severing the darkness as it hit Kojou hard.

Kojou was sent flying without even time to groan in pain.

The whip that had hit Kojou so hard was actually a tail with a sharply tapered tip. When he looked at the black tail, imbued with demonic energy, rising high above, he saw the figure of a small-statured girl.

She was wearing a thin, skintight outfit like a swimsuit. Black wings were protruding from her back.

“Shit, that hurt...!”

Kojou wiped off his bleeding forehead as he looked up at the girl sitting on top of the submarine.

With Kojou unable to get up, Yukina hopped down and raised her spear to cover his back. However, there was hesitation in Yukina's eyes as she stared at the girl. Yukina could not turn her spear upon the girl sitting on top of the submarine.

After all, it was she whom they had come to bring back with them—

Kojou, finally getting back up, called out to the girl with the black tail.

“Yume!”

But the girl with the same face as Yume went “Ah-ha-ha,” laughing as she defiantly spread her arms wide.

“Did you think I was Yume? Sowwy. It's Riru.”

“...Riru, you say?”

Kojou was aghast as he stared at the girl calling herself Riru.

The unexpected situation left his thoughts disjointed. Asagi was supposedly weighing down the Riru inside of the Kusuki-Elysée laboratory. There ought to have been no way the artificially constructed personality could be in control of Yume.

However, the succubus girl looked down with visible scorn at the shaken pair beneath her.

“You sure are stubborn to follow me all the way out here. Didn't you hear from Kiriha? Yume wants to die inside this monster. What, you plan to drag her back against her will? Does that get you anything, Mr. Kojou? Maybe you wanted to do perverted things with Yume...?”

“I did not—!”

Kojou tried to get closer to the girl when a purple firecracker went off at his feet. Kojou's face froze over when he realized he was being shot at.

“Senpai, please be careful! We're surrounded!”

“What the—?”

Kojou looked all around in response to Yukina's words. A horde of countless creatures were wriggling in the darkness everywhere his eyes could see.

Physically, they resembled giant hermit crabs. Instead of having proper crab pincers, they came equipped with cylindrical arms that somehow looked like machine guns. The shot had probably been a demonic energy round coming out of one of those.

Though there was a certain amount of individual size difference, the creatures averaged a couple of meters in length. It was a brigade of small living weapons, each encased in a hard shell. Just from what he could count, their numbers surpassed a hundred.

The horde of living weapons welled up from the floor and the walls, filling up the supposedly unoccupied cavern to surround Kojou and Yukina.

“Did you think you were safe once you got in Leviathan? This part’s totally weaponized, too, you know?”

The succubus girl was coldly rebuffing Kojou and Yukina, as if to say *If you don’t wanna die, leave me here and get lost right now.*

“I can read minds, you know, and boy, does yours annoy me. All that sympathy and hypocrisy... You just want to be filled with self-satisfaction from saving the poor widdle girl, don’t you? Or maybe you really do lust for Yume? Oh no, Mr. Kojou, you’re such a *lolicon!*”

For a while, Kojou listened unemotionally to Yume’s slander. Then, having waited for her words to trail off, he made a heavy sigh as if he was brushing the whole thing aside. Then, a cold smile came over him, seeming to be expressly meant to rub the girl’s pride the wrong way.

“Who’s a lolicon here? Don’t go sticking weird fetishes on other people. I ain’t interested in a little kid’s body!”

“Wha...?! I—I do not have a little kid’s body! Even I have—”

Perhaps Kojou’s taunt had wounded her, for the succubus girl became annoyed, replying without thinking. The entirety of her words gave him a good, hard look at the real her.

Seeing her cover her mouth, conscious of her own slip of the tongue, Kojou let out a strained, listless laugh.

“Figured. Cut the bad acting. There’s no need for that anymore, so let’s go, Yume.”

“It...it’s not acting...”

Yume desperately scrambled to find a rebuttal, but Kojou cut her legs out with ease.

“Riru would never call me something like ‘Mr. Kojou.’”

“Eek!” Her throat trembled as she realized the jig was up.

Her eyes wavered as tears welled up within them. She bit her lip, desperately trying to hold back tears as she spoke in a broken voice.

“How...? Why...?”

The wings at her back vanished. With a slight delay, the tail dissipated as well.

All that was left was a helpless girl, her shoulders trembling.

“You’ve barely met me. I’m not a friend or family, yet you came for me in a dangerous place like this! You had no guarantee of leaving alive!” Yume yelled shakily, sobs escaping her.

Having accepted Riru within her, she now knew everything—including that she had gone to Leviathan to die. If Yume died there, Leviathan’s demonic energy wall would prevent Lilith’s soul from reincarnating again. Therefore, there would never be another child suffering the same misfortune from Lilith’s power.

Hence, why Yume had not wished to involve Kojou and Yukina, both unrelated to her. So she’d earnestly pretended to be Riru to drive Kojou and Yukina away.

Kojou understood how she felt. So, too, did he understand her desire for a gentle death.

But Kojou could not accept that wish. He had a reason why he could not.

“Way back, I knew someone who was a lot like you.”

“Huh?”

Kojou’s abrupt confession made Yume blink like she’d been slapped.

The gaze he turned toward her was as if Kojou was looking far into the distance.

“She was an ordinary girl, too. She wanted to go to school and have fun. But she’d had the Accursed Soul of the World’s Mightiest Vampire pushed onto her, and with that in her arms, she went off and died on me. To save me, and to save Nagisa...”

Then, Kojou gave off a bitter, seemingly self-berating smile.

Yes. That was why Kojou had to save Yume. He’d only finally regained a single, vague, partial fragment of his memories of *her*. The memories throbbed within him like an icy thorn jabbed into the core of his heart, pleading to Kojou to save Yume, for her sake.

“It’s exactly as you said. I’m a hypocrite for doing this. I want to save you when I couldn’t save her, just to soak in the self-satisfaction of it! Even so, I’m savin’ you anyway!”

“Why—?!”

Yume shouted in a sad voice.

Kojou seemed to erase that sadness with his own roar.

“You’ve never been so happy that you thought, ‘I could die right now,’ have you?!”

“—?!”

Yume was at a loss for words, seemingly cowed by Kojou’s shout. As the girl stood petrified, Kojou gently reached his hand out toward her.

“Let’s go back, Yume. It ain’t just me and Himeragi, Kirasaka and Asagi and that bastard Yaze are waiting for you. Nagisa’s working hard to make curry, for your sake. There’s still fireworks left from last night, and you’d better get some fun in at the pool and amusement park. Once we get back to Itogami Island, don’t worry, I’ll ask Natsuki to find a school for you to go to.”

“There’s...no way you could do that... After all, I’m...”

Yume shook her head, desperately trying to defy Kojou’s invitation.

“Oh, shut up,” Kojou growled, coarsely baring his fangs. “Lilith or World’s Mightiest Succubus, it doesn’t matter to me. You’re gonna live a happy life till the day you die. I don’t care if it’s the Bureau of Astrology or Leviathan, if anyone gets in the way, I’ll smash every last one of ‘em! You’re not alone anymore. From here on, this is *my* fight!”

“...Mr....Kojou...”

For a single moment, a truly happy expression seemed to come over Yume. But even so, she immediately shook her head, as if to say even if Kojou accepted her, it wasn’t enough for her to be able to go with him.

“No, senpai. This is *our* fight, yes?” Yukina’s eyes were gently narrowed as she extended a hand to Yume, almost as if to assert that it wasn’t just Kojou who accepted her. “So let’s go home, Yume. Together.”

“Yukina...”

Finally, tears flowed from Yume’s eyes. Yume kicked the roof of the submarine and rushed toward Kojou and Yukina. Both spread their arms wide to welcome her. And that instant—

“Aaah—!”

—Yume’s diminutive body suddenly bent backward, as if shocked by a live wire.

Kojou and Yukina barely managed to catch Yume as she fell, unconscious.

“Yume?! Shit, we’re out of time—?!”

Kojou exclaimed as he held the limp, immobile girl in his arms.

Asagi had said her restraint of LYL would not last more than ten minutes, at most. Kojou half suspected they’d gone past the time limit and that the Riru personality had hijacked Yume once more.

However, no matter how much time passed, Riru had shown no signs of awakening. Furthermore, even if LYL had rebooted, it was strange for Yume to have fainted. Perhaps it was not LYL rebooting that caused Yume’s loss of consciousness. The phenomenon was as though the succubus power purportedly controlling Leviathan had been thrown right back at her.

“Senpai, the living weapons are—!”

Yukina’s shout interrupted Kojou’s thought process. Her voice was blotted out by ferocious gunfire. Yukina lashed out with her silver spear to defend against the purple demonic energy rounds flying at them.

The horde of small-scale living weapons surrounding Kojou and the girls had begun moving all at once. Yume, who had been controlling them, had collapsed, with no sign of Riru awakening.

Who was controlling the horde of small-sized living weapons, if not Yume? Who was their rightful master?

“No way...”

Kojou moaned as he looked down at his own feet.

The next moment, the roar of Leviathan, shaking with rage, filled the air.

5

The angry roar Leviathan unleashed reached even Itogami Island.

“—What’s with this demonic energy wave?! Is this LYL’s doing?” Sayaka exclaimed, sensitive to the ferocious outpouring of demonic energy.

The shock wave was like a speaker cabinet blaring right into her ear.

Sayaka was right in the middle of Demon Beast Park—the innermost part of the Kusuki-Elysée lab. The demonic energy wave bombarding her had passed through thick concrete walls like they were nothing.

Pale blue sparks began to fly from the giant machine dubbed LYL, apparently unable to take the backflow of demonic energy. All Sayaka could do now was gawk.

“Kirasaka, run! Get out of there—quickly!”

She heard Asagi’s voice over the cell phone through which they were keeping in touch. The way even she was in a panic made Sayaka expect the worst.

“B-but what about destroying LYL?!”

“Leviathan’s slipped free of Lilith’s mind control on its own power—”

“What?!”

“I guess that’s the World’s Mightiest Living Weapon for you... Leviathan’s been building up resistance to the mind control without any of us noticing. LYL’s power can’t stop it anymore.”

Sayaka felt blood drain from her entire body as the meaning of Asagi’s words sunk in.

Leviathan had slipped free of Lilith’s mind control. Furthermore, Leviathan had gained the power to defy that mind control of its own free will.

“Then, the demonic energy wave it sent out indiscriminately is...”

“Feels like an angry roar. It’s probably pretty ticked off at LYL and Riru for putting it on a leash.”

“Th...this isn’t funny—!”

Rushing out of the laboratory, Sayaka saw the head of the enormous “dragon” soaring above the water’s horizon. If that overly titanic demon beast was capable of facial expressions, it would likely have worn one of unbridled rage.

Leviathan had defied Lilith. It was beyond question that the World’s Mightiest Demon Beast had found one-sided mind control to be deeply unpleasant. And having slipped from that control, the demon beast had moved on to its next action—revenge.

While the demon beast floated on the water’s horizon, something like a flock of ultramarine birds flew up from its back. But this could be no flock of harmless birds; after all, the opponent was a living weapon from the Age of the Gods.

“—Don’t tell me those are missiles?!”

With one glance, she understood just what role the creatures had; also, that no one was coming to save her. Giant living missiles were tracing parabolic arcs and pouring down on Blue Elysium. Their number was not quite a hundred in total: enough merciless firepower not only to avenge itself against LYL, but to reduce all of Blue Elysium to ash with room to spare.

“Urkk, L-Lustrous Scale—!”

She had no time to hesitate. Sayaka raised her recurve bow, nocking one of her few remaining cursed arrows.

However, the range of a normal bow was woefully insufficient against missiles. Sayaka was left with a single option—using both of Lustrous Scale’s abilities simultaneously.

By firing a cursed arrow through the rip in space created by its special severing ability, the arrow could instantly vault to the surface of the sea several kilometers ahead. It was a practical application of spatial-control magic, the specialty of Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void.

The reason for granting Lustrous Scale, nominally a firing platform for cursed arrows, a bizarre ability such as spatial severing was to enable such ultra-long range sniping attacks. It was a Shamanic War Dancer’s last resort. Using it without permission would mean letters of apology, but she was, of course, too hard-pressed to pay that issue any heed.

The arrow Sayaka launched used a rip in space to teleport. A giant magic circle was created over open water several kilometers off Blue Elysium. The lightning and flames spewing out of the magic circle intercepted the living missiles, enveloping the stream of missiles in one explosion after another.

Sayaka fired a new arrow to destroy missiles that had gotten through, but she had reached her limit. There were simply too many missiles for one individual to shoot down.

A single living missile slipped through Sayaka’s curses, flying straight and true toward the Kusuki-Elysée lab.

“I can’t stop it—!”

Sayaka let out a cry of despair, gazing blankly at the oncoming missile above her. Lustrous Scale’s defensive effect only lasted for a single instant. It was not so user-friendly that she could withstand the heat and blast of a missile.

But before the living missile could reach the Kusuki-Elysée lab, it suddenly split apart and exploded. A single cannon round, fired from a tank on the ground, had shot down the living missile midflight.

A huge, metallic silhouette came running, seemingly to shield Sayaka from the downpour of flames and missile fragments. It was a micro robot tank, not even reaching the size of a small passenger vehicle.

An industrial manipulator arm stretched out, and the robot tank scooped up the surprised Sayaka against her will. When she looked over, she saw the unconscious Kiriha Kisaki being carried by the other manipulator arm.

“Y-you’re...?!”

“I am called Tanker. I am a friend of empress—Asagi Aiba.”

Sayaka’s question, made in a trembling voice, was answered by Tanker in a very stiff manner of speaking.

Even during that span of time, the robot’s main gun opened fire once more, shooting down a new living missile.

“As all Kusuki-Elysée personnel have been evacuated, nothing remains, save for us to make our own escape—though, I knoweth not if that titanic foe can be shaken off.”

Cackling loudly, Tanker accelerated the robot tank.

Behind Sayaka and the others, living missiles finally arrived, their explosions scattering rubble all about as they engulfed Kusuki-Elysée in a sea of flames.

6

Kojou and Yukina sought refuge inside of the *Yotaka*, bringing the still-unconscious Yume with them. The entire area was surrounded by small-scale living weapons, leaving them nowhere else to run.

From time to time, the hermit crab-style living weapons seemed to remember to bathe them in purple demonic energy rounds, but somehow the submarine, developed for the military, withstood the attacks.

“Figures it was built pretty tough. At this rate, it might hold up for an hour or two more, but...”

Kojou sat close to Yukina in the cramped cockpit, murmuring in an

unenthused tone. Thanks to having one piece of trouble thrust on him after another with no time to rest, his endurance was close to finally giving out. If possible, he would've liked to stay right there and rest like that awhile.

However, Yukina thrust reality into his face, almost as if to quash Kojou's faint hopes.

"Blue Elysium shall no doubt be destroyed before then. Worst case, even the Itogami Island main isle—"

"Figures... No time to take it easy, huh?"

"Shit," Kojou weakly spat out, sluggishly lifting up his head.

He'd already gotten the gist of the situation straight from Asagi. Namely, that Leviathan had slipped out of Yume's mind control and was attacking Blue Elysium in a fit of rage.

In the end, if they left Leviathan to its own devices, everything would go as the woman from the Bureau of Astrology wanted. Their efforts would be a drop in the ocean.

"If the big guy's just one demon beast, all we have to do is hurt it enough and it'll go back to the bottom of the sea, right?"

Kojou formed that deduction after sorting out everything he knew about Leviathan. If succubus mind control was ineffective, that left physical action as the only option. Completely destroying the giant living weapon was a tall order, even with the Fourth Primogenitor's power. But if they just had to beat it up to a certain point, it would lower the hurdles considerably.

"You might be right. It may be angry right now, but unlike human beings, it is unlikely to pursue revenge to the point of endangering itself," Yukina concurred.

Even though it had been built as a living weapon, Leviathan was not a belligerent demon beast. That was amply backed up by the fact the demon beast had minded its own business at the bottom of the sea for untold millennia.

They had to fight Leviathan and send it packing.

When put in those terms, it was unnervingly simple, but it seemed to be the only way Kojou and Yukina could resolve the impasse. And only the power of the Fourth Primogenitor could bring that about.

Although, Yukina seemed somewhat disheartened as her shoulders fell.

“However, it is impossible to fight it on the sea’s surface for long periods, senpai. After all, you cannot swim.”

“Never mind me, there ain’t anyone who can swim with a monster like this thrashing around in the sea!”

Kojou looked wounded as he made the rude retort.

As a matter of fact, Kojou could use the power of his Beast Vassals to get out of Leviathan with ease, submarine and all. The problem came after that. No matter how stoutly the *Yotaka* may have been constructed, there was no way it could withstand Leviathan’s attacks. A single demonic energy cannon round, and it was all over.

Therefore, Kojou and Yukina’s only chance of victory was settling things before it came to that.

“The gist is, I’ve gotta do a decisive amount of damage to this thing in one hit, right?”

“Can you do it? If not for the demonic energy wall, I think you might be able to manage, but Snowdrift Wolf’s effective range is several meters, at best.”

“...This thing’s just way too big in the first place...”

Kojou sighed deeply as he recalled his first skirmish with Leviathan. To a certain degree, Leviathan’s powerful demonic energy wall could even fend off the attacks of Kojou’s Beast Vassals. Breaking through that with a single blow and making the demon beast lose its will to fight seemed beyond any sane measure.

That said, he couldn’t summon a Beast Vassal right in the belly of the beast. After all, the vast numbers of living torpedoes and missiles there constituted a huge stockpile of living explosives. Furthermore, a non-trivial amount of demonic energy was needed just to maintain the beast’s giant frame.

If Kojou was to detonate all that with a Beast Vassal, the shock wave from the explosion would wipe Blue Elysium off the map with ease. That would render the effort meaningless.

He needed an attack that could make Leviathan combat-incapable in one blow, yet would also avoid the risk of a chain explosion. Those were very difficult conditions, indeed. He couldn't think of anything that existed on the Earth's surface that qualified. Yes, such a thing did not exist—*on the Earth's surface*.

"I see. That might be worth a try..."

"...Senpai? Have you found a way?"

Hearing Kojou murmur to himself, Yukina turned to him, her eyes filled with hope.

He hesitated for a brief moment before nodding.

"Yeah. You'll cooperate with me, Himeragi?"

"Yes. I shall do anything that is within my power."

Yukina replied instantly and without hesitation, her face full of a sense of responsibility. Reassured by her strong reply, Kojou's face brightened into a smile.

"All right, then. Please take off your clothes."

"—Huh?"

Yukina froze, seemingly dumbfounded as an awkward silence fell for a brief moment. Then, Kojou's vision blurred and shuddered. Without warning, Yukina had released the back of her fist, striking Kojou hard in the temple.

"Ooooo—!"

Reeling from the brain-scrambling blow, Kojou fell prostrate against the wall of the sub.

Yukina nervously reached toward Kojou's back. "I—I am quite sorry. But...it is because you spoke so frivolously at a time like this, senpai..."

"It wasn't frivolous! I was totally serious!"

“Then, that is even worse—!”

Yukina glared at Kojou with a stern expression. Kojou held a hand to his temple, dull pain coursing through it as he wobbled to his feet.

“Not like that. I want to drink your blood. I figure it’s still not enough to wake up *that*. Besides, when I drank Sayaka’s blood, it was with a big hole in my gut —”

“That...? Ahh, now I see what you mean...” Yukina sighed deeply, finally discerning what Kojou was getting at.

Twelve Beast Vassals served within the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor. However, not even half would respond to his summons, for they did not recognize Kojou as their host. Kojou was still a very incomplete vampire, a mere human being until inheriting the power of the Fourth Primogenitor a short time ago.

Sacrifices had to be offered for the difficult-to-please Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor to recognize him as host. In other words, he had to drink the blood of a powerful spirit medium and take it into his own body—that was, at any rate, the fastest method for taming his Beast Vassals.

The blood of a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, like Yukina, more than qualified as a sacrifice. All that remained was for her to deliver Kojou the proper stimulus so that he was struck by the urge to drink blood, but—

“But I refuse.”

Yukina drew the collar of her parka tight, concealing her neck.

“Eh?!”

Her unanticipated reaction left Kojou lost at sea.

The trigger for vampiric impulses was not hunger, but lust—in other words, sexual desire. Put another way, if Kojou was not in a state of arousal, he couldn’t consume blood no matter how much he wanted to.

They were trapped in the belly of a gargantuan demon beast, surrounded by a horde of living weapons. On top of that, there was an elementary schooler sleeping right beside him, and also an older man he didn’t know on the floor by

his feet.

Even with a pretty girl like Yukina up against him inside a cramped submarine, the circumstances were simply too much of a turnoff. Put bluntly, sexual arousal was difficult to come by in this situation.

“—Er, Miss Himeragi. You’ll cooperate with me to wake up the Beast Vassal, won’t you?”

“I suppose so. I did promise, after all. If you want to drink, drink as you please.”

Yukina spoke those somehow frosty words as she turned her back to Kojou. She was acting apathetically, like a wife tired of her marriage.

“Then at least take the parka off. You’re wearing a swimsuit under it and everything, right?”

“—I suppose I am. Still, I refuse.”

“Why?!”

“After all, you will not be pleased to see a swimsuit such as mine, senpai.”

Speaking those words in a pouty tone, Yukina glanced sideways, catching Kojou’s eyes.

“You said seeing a middle schooler’s swimsuit would not please you. That it was no big deal to you.”

“Er... Did I say something like that?”

Bewildered, Kojou groped through his memories. He couldn’t crisply remember the details, but somehow, he felt like he knew the reason Yukina was so atypically uncooperative.

That said, he was a little unsure what someone would think of a guy overjoyed to see his own little sister and her classmate in swimsuits, but—

“I am insufficient for your vampiric impulses, senpai. After all, I do not even have to deal with drag in the water—” Yukina averted her face once more, speaking like she was berating herself.

Kojou scratched his head in exasperation. He thought that any outsider would

see Yukina as blessed with almost unfair looks, but she was surprisingly unaware of that herself.

Certainly, he could understand why being close to a straight-up babe like Asagi and a stylish girl with a model-level face like Sayaka would give a girl a few anxieties, but...

“Well...if that’s how it’s gonna be, guess I’ve gotta use just the Beast Vassals I have on hand...”

Kojou gave up on convincing Yukina and shifted his eyes to what lay beyond the window.

Put plainly, stopping Leviathan with his available resources was going to be difficult. Even if he could fight without any concerns, the beast had a huge home-field advantage in combat at sea. He couldn’t waste any more time moping around.

“Senpai, that wound...!”

That was when he sensed Yukina gasping heavily behind him. She was staring at Kojou’s back. It was pierced with several deep wounds, his T-shirt drenched with blood.

“Ah, that. Took a few hits when we were getting into the sub...”

They ain’t that bad, Kojou seemed to say with a careless shake of his head. The injuries had been caused by the small living weapons surrounding the *Yotaka*. He’d taken a number of demonic energy rounds when they’d fled into the submarine with Yume.

“Did you get those while shielding Yume? Why did you not say anything—?!”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Stuff like this’ll close real quick. More importantly, gotta stop Leviathan ASAP...”

Kojou firmly broke off the exchange.

In point of fact, they weren’t deep wounds. If Kojou was in pristine physical condition, wounds of that level would have healed already, but he’d simply lost too much blood.

He’d been run through the gut by Sayaka’s sword, and his internal organs had

taken a real beating when they charged Leviathan. On top of that, he was low on demonic energy from using multiple Beast Vassals. Along the way, the damage had piled up bit by bit, impeding Kojou's ability to heal. But it wasn't the time to worry about any of that.

"Goodness, senpai... You truly are an incorrigible vampire..."

Yukina exhaled with a strained smile, perhaps beside herself that Kojou had hidden the wounds from her.

Kojou felt like he heard the sounds of a button opening, and fabric sliding down.

"It is fine, senpai. You may look this way."

"...Eh?"

When Yukina addressed him, Kojou looked behind him. His movements stopped, as if he was frozen stiff.

What flew into his field of vision was skin so white, you could almost see through it.

Slender shoulders, the indent of the collarbone, the modest swell of her breasts, her tight, lithe hips... Flesh was exposed all over Yukina's body, right down to the sockets of her hips.

"Er, ah... It is a little embarrassing to be stared at so intently..."

Yukina seemed to blush as she squirmed under Kojou's seemingly fixed gaze. Those words finally brought Kojou back to his senses.

Yukina was wearing a pastel-blue bikini. Upon closer inspection, she was wearing a skirt; her level of exposure was not as high as it had first seemed. Even so, Kojou's gaze was stolen by the sight of her in something she normally wouldn't be caught dead in.

"I...only just bought this swimsuit. I have not yet shown it to anyone else, senpai."

Yukina spoke in a tense tone. But Kojou, captivated by her, could say nothing in reply.

With Kojou maintaining his long silence, Yukina lifted her face up with an entirely natural look of concern and said:

“Does it look...odd?”

“N-no... It really suits you. I think it looks cute,” Kojou said in a raspy voice. His throat was so dry he couldn’t speak properly.

Even so, Yukina seemed happy, smiling bashfully as she said, “*Tee-hee...* This is the first time you have praised someone’s swimsuit, isn’t it, senpai?”

“Y-yeah. Come to think of it, you might be the only one...”

He couldn’t remember making any special comment to Asagi or Sayaka, even Yume, never mind Nagisa. He remembered them being angry with him, though.

“Only me, is it...? Is that so...?”

Somehow, Yukina seemed satisfied as she murmured, closing the distance with Kojou. Apparently, her mood had completely rebounded at some point.

Yukina’s sweet smell filled Kojou’s senses. The hand Kojou wrapped around her back touched her bare, defenseless flesh. The feeling of human skin was cool and comfortable to the touch.

Yukina’s bare neck was right before Kojou’s eyes.

“Himeragi...”

Kojou’s fangs bit down, breaking Yukina’s soft skin.

Fresh, glossy blood flowed down Yukina’s neck. Her voice escaped her lips. She seemed to endure the pain, easing every inch of her tense body as she leaned softly into Kojou’s.

In the dim cockpit, illuminated only by emergency lights, two silhouettes pressed together and ceased to move.

Their breaths and body heat intertwined, quietly melting to become one.

7

The girl sat alone on the roof of a pure-white cottage.

She was an early teen giving off a mildly childish impression—Nagisa Akatsuki. Her long dark hair, worn down, flapped in the gunsmoke-scented wind; a significant departure from her usual, energetic self.

The current Nagisa's smile was so cold, one might have thought her entire body was shrouded in ice.

Her wide eyes were trained on a giant silhouette floating on the horizon.

Inside the cottage, Asagi was facing her computer. Leading Blue Elysium visitors to safety, requesting assistance from the coast guard, sending warnings to nearby ships at sea—Asagi was doing all these things single-handedly. Leviathan's emergence hadn't created a panic inside Blue Elysium largely thanks to her efforts.

She is really something..., Nagisa Akatsuki mused.

The cost of Asagi's heroic efforts was that the hacker had lost her chance to evacuate. Although, she surely didn't feel like a martyr or anything of the sort. It needed to be done, so she did it. That was all it was. Yes, just like the boy who had calmly exposed himself to gunfire to save his little sister in the Demon Sanctuary of a different land—

She thought, if it was possible, she wanted to help that proud girl. But as she was now, Nagisa had no power to drive off the enormous living weapon.

Yet, she didn't worry, because she sensed that one of her dear companions had woken anew.

"I see... So you are next..."

These words spoken, Nagisa looked up at the sky—to the clear, blue sky spread above the sea that the living weapon from the Age of the Gods had set astir.

"Good War Dancer, art thou all right—?!"

Tanker's overbearing lament was broadcast at full blast by the external speaker.

Sayaka was sitting listlessly on the semispherical armor reminiscent of a land turtle as she said:

“I’m done for. I’m out of cursed arrows, and even my endurance is at its limit...!”

“Ha-ha-ha! ’Tis understandable. My cannon is also out!”

The robot tank spun around on the tires embedded into the front legs and accelerated.

With Tanker’s assistance, Sayaka had already shot down nearly three hundred of Leviathan’s living missiles. In that sense, the two girls were the main reason damage to Blue Elysium had been limited.

Sayaka didn’t know why Tanker, purportedly in the employ of the Bureau of Astrology, had lent her aid. Her hacking duel with Asagi had probably led to a change of heart.

However, their weapons were now depleted. In the first place, it had been reckless for them to challenge a living weapon from the Age of the Gods with man-sized weaponry.

“—Next round, incoming!” Tanker announced loudly, whirling the main camera around.

Sayaka ground her teeth when she looked up and saw a flock of living missiles filling the sky to the brim. The numbers were well in excess of what was needed to burn Blue Elysium to a crisp. It was a sight one might attribute to the end of the world.

But suddenly, that very flock of living missiles vanished in a shining ray. A giant, glimmering, dazzling thunderbolt had engulfed the countless living missiles, causing them to explode.

“What?! ’Tis a grand spectacle!”

Heedless of the tension, Tanker raised her voice in admiration.

Flames filled the sky, reminiscent of fireworks at a festival, with a delayed boom afterward.

Surrounded by gun smoke, a lightning lion emerged, scattering thunderbolts all about.

“A Fourth Primogenitor...Beast Vassal...! That means—”

As if responding to Sayaka's murmur, a small explosion erupted from Leviathan's surface.

A sonic wave shell had pulverized its thick scales. From the open cavity within, a beat-up white submarine emerged, seemingly shot out by a scarlet, twin-horned horse.

The submarine was in a tailspin as it fell, kicking up a tall spout of water as it landed on the surface of the sea.

The scarlet Beast Vassal had scattered blast winds throughout Leviathan's interior; the submarine *Yotaka* used the resulting recoil to fly outside.

The shock wave made the hull audibly creak, smashing the floodlights and ripping the stabilizing fins off. In spite of this, the submarine itself was safe. Even as everyone was jostled around in the cramped cockpit, Kojou sprung up from Yukina and the others, who'd ended up on the floor under him.

"—You all right, Himeragi?!"

"Yes. Yume is fine as well!"

Yukina, who'd shielded the unconscious Yume, stood up, too, spear in hand.

The hull of the *Yotaka*, designed to withstand water pressure in the deep sea, defied even the whirlpool kicked up by Leviathan's giant frame. The submarine was uncontrollable and buffeted by tall waves, but Kojou used the blast winds scattered by the bicorn to somehow get it to a safe distance.

"Just hold for a little longer!"

Kojou called out to the helplessly creaking submarine as he opened the hatch and climbed up from the boat.

Leviathan had scattered its own living torpedoes and missiles about, but when it came to destructive power, Kojou's Beast Vassals had the edge. So long as the defense held, he didn't need to worry about going down easy.

The problem was Leviathan's enormous body itself, protected by a stalwart demonic energy wall. Even Kojou had no means to bring something that massive to a halt. If it pressed ahead full force, Blue Elysium could not endure.

Kojou had to settle things before Leviathan arrived at the subfloat.

“...Living weapon from the Age of the Gods...the World’s Mightiest Demon Beast, huh...?”

Kojou murmured while looking up at the ultramarine monster.

The head of Leviathan glared down at Kojou, seeming to be annoyed at the insect it could not manage to squish.

Such awe-inspiring might was enough to make one hallucinate that he faced no demon beast but an uncontrollable force of nature, like a tornado or a volcanic eruption.

But when it came to global threat levels, Kojou’s was no less. After all, the twelve Beast Vassals serving the Fourth Primogenitor, too, were calamity incarnate.

“Now that I think of it, you might be the biggest victim in all of this. You were sleeping comfortably at the bottom of the sea when someone slapped you awake and controlled you however she wanted—so I get why you wanna let loose.”

Even though Kojou knew that his own voice would not reach, he addressed Leviathan with what seemed like pity.

Then, his eyes glowed crimson as he coarsely roared:

“It’s too much to ask for you to just let it all go, Leviathan. So if you’re gonna hate someone, hate *me*—!”

Demonic energy resembling pitch-black miasma spewed from Kojou’s entire body.

He glared at the blue sky far above his head as he raised both hands high. It was as if he were drawing a giant, invisible sword from its earthen sheath.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the bloodline Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds—!”

The miasma unleashed by Kojou warped the air, finally creating a cavity in the form of a sword.

It was thousands of meters tall, yet clearly visible to the naked eye. It was a ridiculously huge sword with a blade over a hundred meters wide.

Properly speaking, its shape replicated an ancient weapon known as a Vajra sword. It was said to be a blade used by the gods to smite devils.

“...An Intelligent Weapon?! A Sword...of Judgment...!” Yukina exclaimed, realizing the true nature of Kojou’s Beast Vassal.

Yukina still didn’t know one thing: The girl known as Root Aurora had once summoned that vile Beast Vassal forth to sink a portion of Itogami Island.

“—C’mon over, Beast Vassal number seven, Kiffa Ater!”

Responding to Kojou’s call, the enormous sword began to fall.

The blade was enveloped by incandescent flames as it accelerated via gravity’s pull. The sight was like a meteor falling to Earth. The atmosphere roared and trembled; the sky became as bright as if a new sun had emerged.

Leviathan, doubtlessly sensing the bizarre presence, began to turn its head. It was attempting to escape from the black sword’s landing point.

But before it could, the black sword fell faster still. Kiffa Ater was no mere giant sword. It was a Beast Vassal possessing a will of its own.

That servant’s ability was the control of gravity. The sword, accelerating from many times the normal force of gravity, became a supersonic bullet sailing toward Leviathan’s gargantuan frame.

“Sorry, Leviathan. That big body of yours can’t get away.”

Kojou made a thin, frail smile, as if pitying the World’s Mightiest Demon Beast.

The next instant, the sword Beast Vassal became a ray of light impaling Leviathan’s enormous body.

Even the stalwart demonic energy wall, the pride of the living weapon from the Age of the Gods, was powerless in the face of the kinetic energy from such overwhelming speed. The giant sword, its blade more than a hundred meters wide, completely ran Leviathan through and plunged straight into the sea.

But the destruction wrought by Kiffa Ater did not end there. The true destructive might engendered by the black sword was the explosive shock wave right after the arrival of the sword blow.

The impact of the falling Beast Vassal, rivaling a meteorite, pounded into Leviathan's giant frame and parted the very sea. An incredibly tall spout of water spewed forth. The surface of the sea swelled up like a tsunami, and beyond that, the reaction gave rise to an enormous whirlpool several kilometers in diameter.

Naturally, Kojou and the others did not escape unscathed, either.

Being so close to Leviathan, they took the brunt of the shock wave. This time, the *Yotaka* was simply sent flying. Had Yukina not immediately dragged Kojou inside and closed the hatch, she would most certainly have sunk.

"You overdid it, senpai! Are you trying to sink Blue Elysium as well—?!"

The vestiges left by the sword Beast Vassal's destruction made Yukina's face pale as she glared at Kojou.

"C-couldn't help it. Holding back ain't exactly an option here...!"

Kojou's own expression twitched as he broke into a sweat. It was actually the first time he'd summoned that Beast Vassal, but it was far harder to control than he'd imagined. It was a creature so vile that there was no use for it, save spreading indiscriminate destruction. Kojou prayed in his heart that he would never need to summon it again.

Seeing that the waves had calmed, Kojou and Yukina went outside the *Yotaka* once more.

"—Did we get it?"

Kojou surveyed the white, swirling surface of the sea in search of Leviathan.

Naturally, their own submarine had reached the limits of its tensile strength. The thick window was cracked, and the cockpit was beginning to flood. It was unlikely to sink immediately, but it could not withstand further combat. Kojou desperately hoped Leviathan would retreat right about then.

However, the demon beast's enormous body rose to the sea's surface, disregarding Kojou's wish.

"—He still wants to go at it?!"

Kojou audibly ground his teeth as he glared at the wounded Leviathan.

The demon beast's wound was not shallow. It would not have been strange for it to turn tail as Kojou and Yukina had hoped. But Leviathan had not lost its will to fight. If the battle continued any further, it would not end until one side was dead.

"No, senpai! Blue Elysium cannot withstand another attack like the last one!"

Kojou was on the verge of resummoning his Beast Vassal when Yukina called on him to stop.

Truthfully, Blue Elysium's coastal section had suffered quite a bit of damage as a side effect of the first attack. If it took another shock wave of equal force the next time, it was very likely to sustain fatal damage in the process.

"But at this rate—"

Kojou exclaimed as he looked up at the raging beast.

If the wounded living weapon challenged him to a mad fight to the death, Kojou had no room to hold back. The next attack would determine who lived and who died.

No doubt, Leviathan instinctively understood that as well.

Kojou and the demon beast charged up their strength, waiting for the right time to launch their final attacks—

Then, without warning, a diminutive silhouetted figure gently walked before their eyes.

"Wha—?!"

"—Yume?!"

Kojou and Yukina shouted simultaneously. The supposedly unconscious Yume was standing on the bow of the submarine, staring at Leviathan.

She awkwardly stretched out both hands, silently calling out to the enormous demon beast.

"Stop it, Yume! Your mind control won't work on Leviathan anymore, so—"

Realizing what Yume was trying to do, Kojou called out to stop her. She meant to use her succubus power to control Leviathan again, returning it to the

bottom of the sea.

Certainly, if she could do that, they could avoid such a meaningless battle, but that was no longer possible. Leviathan, the living weapon, had become resistant to her power and would obey her no longer—

Spreading black wings, Yume looked back at them, smiling, for one brief moment. Then, she took to the air, as if slipping away from Kojou's outstretched hand. She headed right before Leviathan's eyes. Lacking wings of his own, all Kojou could do was watch her go, dumbfounded.

"No... Senpai. This is—," Yukina murmured, watching Yume.

Kojou realized what she was trying to say.

A faint voice echoed inside his head.

The reverberation was like a whale calling out to its own kind.

It had a simple timbre that went beyond words. A gentle, heartrending melody...

"A song...?"

Yume was singing. Properly speaking, it was not a song; a melodic voice was simply how Kojou and Yukina heard the mind control pulse that Yume was emitting.

It had to have reached Leviathan, too.

Anger faded from the World's Mightiest Demon Beast. The waves of demonic energy scattered about by its mad rampage were abating.

"She's...convincing it, the living weapon from the Age of the Gods..."

The sea's surface began to stir. Leviathan's ultramarine body started to submerge. Its movements no longer revealed any enmity for Kojou or the others. The demon beast had accepted Yume's persuasion.

"...They call Lilith the Witch of the Night...?"

Kojou narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the radiant sight of Yume.

The wings on her back were fading and vanishing; perhaps it the result of using her power to convince Leviathan. She fluttered lower and lower, and

before she could return to the submarine, she fell into the sea.

Yukina, clutching a life vest, dove into the sea to retrieve the young girl. *What witch?* Kojou mused, reaching out with his hand as the two earnestly swam back.

She was like a goddess of light.



OUTRO

OUTRO

On a bench in a small park with a view of the sea, a single woman sat.

Small-statured, she was also young, or rather, had a very childlike face. She did not look more than eleven or twelve years old. She was clothed in an elegant, laced-up dress, and carried a small parasol. The sight of her gazing at the sea without stirring was like looking at a beautiful Western-style doll, left and forgotten.

Perhaps a strong wind had blown through, for the park's flower bed was a mess. It looked like a typhoon had just passed through.

Yet, the sea was calm; the sky, clear.

With Leviathan's withdrawal, the evacuation order for Blue Elysium had been lifted. It would take time to restore Demon Beast Park, but it was said that the pools and amusement park would be back in operation as soon as inspections were complete.

About 30 percent of the visitors had fled the island, but the remaining 70 percent seemed to be spending their time in leisure. The daily routines of the Demon Sanctuary's residents could not be shaken by a mere demon beast attack.

Not even if the attacker was the World's Mightiest Demon Beast.

Finally, a new figure came to visit the park, sitting at the same bench as the woman with the parasol.

This girl wore a long, plain skirt that seemed a poor match for a resort. She had unfashionable glasses and a hairstyle that did not stand out. She held a thick book over her lap.

"—It would seem the chairman of Kusuki-Elysée has been arrested on suspicion of terrorism," said the woman with the parasol, speaking first.

Belying her adorable face, her tone of voice conveyed an air of majesty.

“Him being a financier of ecoterrorism will kick up quite a scandal in itself. There’s no talking him out of this with so much evidence left behind. I do feel a little sorry for how they’re treating what he tried to control like a common sea serpent.” She smiled slightly, seemingly pitying Kusuki.

Leviathan was a living weapon from the Age of the Gods: an inviolable, sacred monster. If it was established that it had fallen under human control, albeit temporarily, there was no guarantee that someone else would not emerge to try to control it again, like he had.

Hence, they had locked the truth away.

It was not Leviathan that Kusuki had tried to use as an instrument of terror, but a lowly sea serpent—and the common demon beast had been exterminated by the Island Guard, turning it into tasty fish paste. That was the summary of the incident released to the public.

Kusuki-Elysée had been disbanded, and the heavily damaged Demon Beast Park was given new life as an enterprise under the Gigafloat Management Corporation. As a result, the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island had effortlessly obtained a facility for keeping demon beasts. It was an unanticipated side effect of the uproar. And...

“This time, we were saved by the Fourth Primogenitor, yes?” the girl with the book said, a hint of laughter in her quiet voice.

The woman with the parasol shrugged her shoulders, seeming a little beside herself. “You have some nerve to say that. Were you not the ones who dragged him into this?”

“Had we not done so, we would have lost a number of precious cards to play. As a result, Blue Elysium was saved as well.”

“Cards to play... I see. So you played against the moderates in the Bureau of Astrology?”

“Mm-hmm.” The parasol woman laughed derisively.

The women of the Lion King Agency had understood everything from the

beginning: that the Bureau of Astrology was using Kusuki, and that their goal was to eliminate Asagi Aiba.

Hence, the Lion King Agency had infiltrated Kusuki-Elysée with a Shamanic War Dancer, setting up contact between Lilith and the Fourth Primogenitor. Getting Asagi Aiba to Blue Elysium was simply an expedient means of containing the damage. From the beginning, the women had intended to make Leviathan and the Fourth Primogenitor fight each other.

Perhaps it was not too much to say that as a result, the situation had concluded in precisely the manner the Lion King Agency had wished.

“Due to this incident, the Bureau of Astrology owes us greatly. Many political enemies within the government shall surely lose standing as well. There should not be another attempt on the Priestess of Cain like this for some time.”

“I would hope not. It isn’t a good feeling to have the lives of one’s adorable pupils targeted—”

The woman with the parasol spoke in a tone neither fully in jest, nor fully in earnest. Then, she slowly shifted her gaze and looked at the girl.

“—Incidentally, what is he doing?”

“He, you say?” the girl with the book inquired with a questioning look.

The woman with the parasol twisted her lips, resembling a child forced to eat spinach. “He’s here, isn’t he? The idiot combat maniac who blew off a dazzling opportunity to pick a fight with a powerful foe like Leviathan.”

“Ahh, I see.” She giggled and shook her head. “He is not on Itogami Island at present.”

“He isn’t...?”

“No. I do not believe it is mere coincidence that the Bureau of Astrology provoked this incident during his absence...but he likely has his own ideas. He is a rather fickle man, after all.” The girl spoke in a rather evasive tone.

“His own ideas, you say... Though it does not sound like he will return to this land soon.”

The parasol woman’s thin eyebrows rose at the girl’s suggestive words. She

twirled her parasol in apparent annoyance as she glared at the girl.

“Then let me ask you, Lion King Agency: Where is he?”

The girl calmly received the hostile witch’s glare as she raised her face. She stroked a page of the book on her lap as she shifted her gaze to the distant horizon.

“The Third Primogenitor’s Dominion in Central America—the Chaos Zone.”



“So...tired...”

Kojou was walking on a Blue Elysium sidewalk carrying Yume, asleep, on his back.

His destination, the cottage, was another two-or three-minute walk away. Yume’s body weight was no great burden to a boy-turned-vampire like Kojou, but the powerful rays of the nearly midday sun were rather hard on him.

“I suppose,” concurred Yukina.

There was no great change in the girl’s invigorating outward appearance, but judging from how easily she had accepted his words, she might have been fairly run-down as well. At any rate, they were on the way back from having grandly fought the World’s Mightiest Demon Beast; not being tired would have been far stranger.

For her part, Sayaka had said she’d overused her ritual energy and was unable to move, so she was resting at the villa of a friend of Asagi’s for a while. Kojou was somewhat curious about the booming, antiquated music and the sound of tanks in the background on her end, but broke off the call without comment. He wanted nothing to do with a nonsensical “friend” like that.

“But I am relieved the damage was no greater than this. All the beasts at Demon Beast Park appear well, and the pool and amusement park shall return to normal operation, it seems.”

“Yeah... Well, people living on Itogami Island get kinda used to typhoons passing through and stuff...”

Kojou wasn’t sure if his murmur amounted to sound logic, but he decided it

made sense anyway. A lot had happened, but at any rate, the island was safe. Also, they'd come back with Yume. There ought to have been no better time to feel satisfied.

"But I really don't feel like playing around on a day like this... Figure I'll loaf around at the cottage."

Kojou breathed a sigh of relief when he looked up, finally approaching the cottage.

The silver lining was that Kojou and the others were still scheduled to stay for another night. With nothing to do that day or night, Kojou could spend his time in limp idleness until morning.

With Kojou hardening his resolve toward that underwhelming goal, for some reason, Yukina gave him a mystified look as she said, "I suppose you could. But are you really all right with that, senpai?"

"Huh?"

"Er, I mean... Or perhaps you have forgotten that—"

Out of concern for Kojou, Yukina seemed to hesitate before continuing her words, when...

"Aaah——!"

With a patter of steps, a figure ran out of the cottage, shouting loud enough to bother the neighbors. It was Nagisa.

"Kojou, Yukina, welcome back! Yume's with you, too?! I'm so surprised! When I woke up everyone was gone—ah, more importantly, oh no, Kojou! The time, the time!"

"Hey, calm down. What time is it, anyway?"

Kojou inquired in a rational voice, trying to calm the worked-up Nagisa. As Kojou did so, he heard an *nn* from behind and sensed that Yume was waking up. Nagisa's boisterous voice had apparently stirred her. And beyond that:

"K-Kojou! S-save me!"

Asagi came running toward Kojou and the others, chasing after Nagisa—or

more accurately, fleeing from some terrifying thing. Naturally, even Kojou was surprised that the normally unflappable Asagi was so unnerved. Asagi hadn't even panicked from the knowledge that Leviathan was drawing near. Kojou could not help but subconsciously be on guard at whatever had managed to scare her that much.

“Asagi, what the heck happened...?”

“She's here! L-look! Over there—!”

“.....Eh?”

Kojou shifted his gaze in the direction Asagi pointed...and froze.

A familiar electric cart was in the parking space in front of the cottage.

It was an all-white, corporate cart with little in terms of decoration. The driver's side door had a logo pasted on it from a franchise named Radaman Pavillionz. Standing beside the cart was a young woman wearing a tight skirt—the female proprietor of the poolside food stand.

“Ch-chief...?!”

“Ahh, Akatsuki. Welcome back. I just arrived to pick you up. It's time for that fun part-time job again!”

Chief had been shooting the breeze with Yaze, but realizing that Kojou had returned, she held out a beckoning hand.

Yes, Blue Elysium's pools were back in operation, even immediately following an uproar of that scale. If the pools were in operation, it naturally meant that the stall had to be staffed, too. Kojou felt dizzy when that fact sunk in.

“Y-Yaze—?!” Kojou abruptly shouted at Yaze, who didn't seem that troubled.

“What? I don't really get what you want, but I can't do anything, 'kay? You're the one paying for the travel expenses with part-time work, after all.”

Yaze spoke the truth. Having to fight something like Leviathan before part-time work was all on Kojou and Asagi. But even so, having such a hard part-time job waiting for them as their reward for saving the island via deadly combat was too horrible for words.

But then, as a look of despair washed over Kojou and Asagi, a clear, female voice spoke up to refute Yaze:

“Please wait—!”

Yume wedged herself between them, arms wide.

The sudden intervention of the elementary school girl surprised Yaze, the chief, and of course, even Kojou.

“Y-Yume?”

“Mr. Kojou can’t work. He’s coming with me to have fun.”

“...Huh? What?”

“Well, you promised me, Mr. Kojou. You said you’d take me to the pool and the amusement park. I am an expert swimmer. It’ll be fun!”

Yume looked up at Kojou with a sparkling, childlike gaze.

Yaze and chief, put in the uncomfortable position of being at odds with Yume, looked at Kojou. Nagisa grumbled, as if Yume’s plea put her own prized position as his little sister in jeopardy. *What’s that supposed to mean?* said Asagi’s half-lidded glare at Kojou.

Kojou wore an expression of shock as he looked back at Yume.

“P-promise...?”

“Yes. You said it yourself, didn’t you, Mr. Kojou? That you’d make me happy for life.”

“For life... Uh... Uhhh?!”

Kojou took half a step back, confused. *What the heck?* he asked himself. He remembered having spoken words similar in meaning, but he thought them inconsistent with her leap of logic.

She made it sound like he’d proposed—words he’d never speak to Yume, an elementary schooler, even by mistake.

“I...said something like that?”

Hoping for any foothold, he glanced at Yukina, who’d been right there at the

time, to vouch for him. Yukina—Yukina, of all people—would surely prove Kojou's innocence.

In spite of that, Yukina's statement was merciless. "Unfortunately, you said something that certainly could be taken that way, senpai."

"That's crazy," Kojou whined, clutching his head.

And with Kojou rocked by the unfounded accusation that he was a lolicon, Yume wrapped her arms around him and said, "Tee-hee-hee. We'll be together forever."

Her eyes narrowed in a happy smile as she spoke. Her expression was truly adorable, enough to make anyone think she was five years old.

"Kojou..."

"Kojou, don't tell me...you really are a...?"

Nagisa and Asagi shot Kojou gazes filled with distrust. Meanwhile, Yaze commented, "Mm, well, they look happy," sending irresponsible words of encouragement their way.

Kojou shifted his gaze to the sky, seemingly to avert his eyes from the harsh reality.



Looking up at the serene, blue sky, he was seized by the sense they were at the bottom of the ocean.

“Gimme a break...”

The murmur of Kojou’s voice faded away in the distant sky.

Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island, Subfloat Blue Elysium.

It seemed that the busy day on the island, with a name fit for an amusement park, would continue for a while thereafter.

Afterword

I'm the type of human being who loafs around his own house rather than goes to far-flung places, but actually, I've traveled a decent amount, with travel-loving friends taking me to this or that famous resort: Okinawa, Guam, Hawaii, and so on. And along the way, I've had such terrible times that it's funny. Missing our flight and having to wait half a day at the airport was relatively benign compared to, say, being unable to leave the hotel until the day of the return trip because of a direct typhoon, or having the brakes of your rental car give out halfway on a long, downward slope and staring death in the face. Beyond that was an international phone call from Mr. Managing Editor right after landing at the destination airport, with all my fellow travelers going off to have fun while I stayed at the hotel all by myself, writing copy, something I remember vividly to this day. Ha-ha-ha...

So in a similar vein, my own biases toward resorts were certainly reflected in the current episode. If you go on a trip, tribulations await!

On that note, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 9 has been delivered.

In contrast to the relatively heavy story of the previous volume, I planned to focus on daily life and a resort in this book, but once I lifted the lid, all kinds of crucial bits of info started trickling out.

Among them, the especially large keyword was *demon beast*, I suppose. Just as described in the story, these are non-humanoids discriminated against compared to demons, whether they can communicate with humankind (chiefly via language) or not. Naturally, in a world where vampires and beast men dwell, it is not strange for other monsters to emerge—but the reason demon beasts hadn't appeared very much so far was because they were not under Demon Sanctuary protection. That said, I felt like it was a good idea to write about them this time around and further expand the setting. The result became clear, the world's own distortions included.

Besides, I feel like this is first time we've had Yukina and friends in swimsuits. Even though a southern island is the stage for the setting, sea bathing and pools somehow felt too normal, but, I thought, might as well do this sort of thing sometime. It also bugged me that no one had done any actual swimming (not that they were wearing proper swimsuits at the time), but there'll be other opportunities for that.

Now then, I think the *Strike the Blood* TV anime might well be airing by the time this volume goes on sale. Fortunately, I have the firm feeling we've been blessed by excellent staff and a splendid piece of work will be the result, which I'm looking forward to from a creator's perspective. I think the contents will satisfy all of you who have supported the novel series so far.

Furthermore, the comic version of *Strike the Blood* is being serialized in *Monthly Dengeki Daioh*. As always, TATE-sensei, I thank you for taking over the comic version. Please keep it up!

Once again, Manyako took very good care of me with the illustrations. It's always fun to look over the design leaflets, and I like all the girls in this volume, new characters included. Thank you very much!

Last but not least, I want to thank from the bottom of my heart everyone involved in the creating and distributing of this work (i.e., the people I caused trouble to on the schedule front).

And of course, a hearty thank you to all of you who have read this book.

I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink